

ISSUE BRIEF

The Chosen People vs. Their Chosen People

Israelis Are the Victims of the Political Shenanigans of Their Elected Leaders

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It was a long, hot summer in Israel. Rowdy protests opposing and supporting—but mostly opposing—the continued rule of the country's embattled premier, Benjamin Netanyahu, have persevered into their third consecutive month. Saturday nights outside the prime minister's official residence in downtown Jerusalem have attracted many thousands of facemasked demonstrators, some wielding placards that read "Crime Minister," united in their demand for his outright resignation.¹ (Comparisons to the United States are not unwarranted.²) Netanyahu is set to appear in court on December 6 for a final hearing before the start of his January trial on multiple charges of bribery, fraud, and breach of trust.³

It gets worse. Israelis were narrowly spared the dubious distinction of being summoned to the polls for the fourth time in less than two years when members of their governing coalition acquiesced to an eleventh-hour bargain extending the deadline for the passage of a state budget.⁴ A few more hours of futile political wrangling, and the onset of an August 25 expiration date for the approval of a new budgetary framework, would have triggered the automatic dissolution of the Knesset and, three months later, a general election.⁵

- 1 Anat Peled, "At Biggest Anti-Netanyahu Rally Yet, Police Are Restrained and Hasidim Join In," *Times of Israel*, August 30, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/at-biggest-anti-netanyahu-rally-yet-police-are-restrained-and-hasidim-join-in/>.
- 2 Chemi Shalev, "Trump Taught Netanyahu How to Provoke and Then Exploit Police Brutality: Opinion," *Haaretz*, August 23, 2020, <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-trump-taught-netanyahu-how-to-provoke-and-then-exploit-police-brutality-1.9095714>.
- 3 "Netanyahu Due in Court for Last Preliminary Hearing on December 6," *Times of Israel*, July 26, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-due-in-court-for-last-preliminary-hearing-on-december-6/>.
- 4 Moran Azulay, "Elections Averted as Knesset Votes to Delay Budget Deadline," *ynetnews*, August 24, 2020, <https://www.ynetnews.com/article/JK5LX4FYK>.
- 5 Assaf Shapira, "Disbanding the Knesset for Lack of an Approved Budget Makes No Sense," Israel Democracy Institute, August 9, 2020, <https://en.idi.org.il/articles/32252>.

Israel is nowhere near out of the woods yet. Kicking the can down the road—parliament won itself a 120-day reprieve, until December 23, to legislate a fiscal deal—does not constitute a durable remedy to the overarching affliction of systemic chaos.⁶ It is widely presumed, in fact, that Netanyahu has every intention of forcing a premature ballot in the months remaining until November 2021, when Alternate Prime Minister Benny Gantz is slated to replace him at Israel's helm.⁷

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The interim period will be certain to witness chronic sparring between Netanyahu's Likud, its Ultra-Orthodox fellow travelers, and its partners from Gantz's Blue-White Party over competing priorities, including the comparative merits of one-year and two-year budgets.⁸ Debilitating controversies surrounding the performance of law enforcement and the judiciary will persist, eroding popular confidence in civic institutions.⁹ And, the disheartening predicament of Israel's national (dis)unity government, unable to accom-

plish almost anything—if anything at all—without bickering over substance and credit, will expand the chronic leadership vacuum that plagues the country.

Netanyahu presides over this turmoil with a mixture of guile and hubris. He is the seemingly invulnerable pivot of Israeli politics, who Israelis still score as the most suitable candidate for prime minister.¹⁰ Having engineered the departure of Likud's storied old guard, Netanyahu, with his son in the role of *consigliere*, now captains the ship of the ruling Likud alone and ruthlessly, enjoying the unflinching loyalty of its deferential passengers.¹¹ His nepotistic management style—comparable perhaps to that championed by US President Donald Trump and the world's royal houses—has neutralized dissent and put Israel's democracy on the defensive.

Fallout from this crisis of accountability has impaired Israel's capacity to formulate and implement sound decisions across the full spectrum of items on its agenda. Efforts to combat COVID-19 are only one of the casualties. Challenges involving diplomacy, security, economics, and even religious faith have been met with incoherent responses from feuding government agents and agencies whose authority is regularly eviscerated. Israelis, increasingly skeptical when it comes to judging the motivations of their elected representatives, can cite ample evidence to find them guilty of subjugating the national interest to their own partisan needs.¹²

One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

“This is the time for unity,” Netanyahu proclaimed after signing off on the compromise to salvage Israel from the threat of immediate elections.¹³ His next words fueled lingering doubts about his sincerity. Segueing directly into

6 “Bill to Extend Deadline for Passing a State Budget by 120 Days Approved for Final Votes in the Plenum,” Knesset, press release, August 24, 2020, <https://m.knesset.gov.il/EN/News/PressReleases/Pages/press24820f.aspx>.

7 Gil Hoffman, “Whether Elections Are Called Is in Netanyahu's Hands,” *Jerusalem Post*, August 20, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/politics-and-diplomacy/whether-elections-are-called-is-in-netanyahus-hands-639411>.

8 Ariel Kahana and Yehuda Shlezinger, “Threat of Snap Elections Rears Its Head over Budget Crisis,” *Israel Hayom*, August 20, 2020, <https://www.israelhayom.com/2020/08/20/threat-of-snap-elections-rears-its-head-as-budget-crisis-deepens/>.

9 “Likud Claims Prosecution Encouraging ‘Violent Anarchy’ with Stance on Protests,” *Times of Israel*, August 26, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/likud-claims-prosecution-encouraging-violent-anarchy-with-stance-on-protests/>.

10 Cody Levine, “Dramatic Rise in Support for Bennett, Likud Support Holds Still—Poll,” *Jerusalem Post*, August 16, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/poll-dramatic-rise-in-support-for-yamina-likud-support-holds-still-638877>.

11 “Former Likud Minister: There Is No Likud, Just the Netanyahu Party,” *Times of Israel*, May 30, 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/former-likud-minister-there-is-no-likud-just-the-netanyahu-party/>; Shuki Sadeh, “The Rise of Yair Netanyahu, the 25-Year-Old Who Has the Prime Minister's Ear,” *Haaretz*, May 12, 2016, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium.MAGAZINE-the-rise-of-yair-netanyahu-the-25-year-old-who-has-the-premier-s-ear-1.5469262>.

12 Shalom Lipner, “A Mess at the Knesset,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 26, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/israel/2018-04-26/mess-knesset>.

13 “PM Netanyahu's Remarks at His Press Conference,” Prime Minister's Office, August 23, 2020, https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/event_press230820.



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Benny Gantz, centrist Blue and White leader and Netanyahu's partner in Israel's unity government, talk during a swearing in ceremony of the new government at the Knesset in Jerusalem on May 17, 2020. Source: Amos Ben Gershon/Knesset Spokesperson's Office/Handout via Reuters

a broadside at his own associates, Netanyahu delivered thinly veiled criticism of Blue-White, asserting that “the government within a government must stop.”¹⁴ He took advantage of the ensuing question-and-answer session to launch a more explicit assault on Israel's justice minister, attorney general, and mainstream media.¹⁵ “Netanyahu is causing a rift in the country,” Gantz retorted three days later.¹⁶ Judging

from the unrelenting turn of dysfunctional events in Israel, both prime ministers could be correct.

On January 28, after the White House debut of President Trump's “Peace to Prosperity” vision for Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation, Netanyahu told journalists that he would be submitting plans to the cabinet in Jerusalem for the

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ “Netanyahu Says He Accepts Compromise Deal to Delay New Elections,” *Times of Israel*, August 23, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-says-he-accepts-compromise-deal-to-delay-new-elections>.

¹⁶ “Gantz Accuses Netanyahu of ‘Dividing the People,’” *Jerusalem Post*, August 26, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/gantz-accuses-netanyahu-of-dividing-the-people-640016>.

extension of Israel's sovereignty in the West Bank.¹⁷ That did not happen. The said meeting, scheduled for the following Sunday, was cancelled abruptly after senior presidential advisor Jared Kushner told *GZERO World* that the United States expected Israel to take no such action before its March (i.e., most recent) vote—which would end inconclusively and produce the current, cross-wired government.¹⁸

A confused stalemate remains in force. At Netanyahu's insistence, his initial accord with Gantz provided for the annexation of 30 percent of the West Bank as early as July 1, but the status quo continues to reign supreme.¹⁹ The reason for the impasse lies, in large degree, with Gantz—who has stipulated that battling the pandemic must take precedence over all else—and his Blue-White caucus, whose reservations about taking unilateral measures have stalled movement.²⁰ Working diplomatic backchannels, Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi, Gantz's wingman, reportedly worked to scuttle the initiative.²¹ The United States has figured prominently in the endeavor to block Netanyahu from advancing.

The math is simple. On June 8, the *Jerusalem Post* confirmed that the Trump administration was withholding its green light for the application of Israeli law in the West Bank until such time as Gantz consents to the venture.²² One month later, on August 10, Netanyahu confessed to Israel's Channel 20 that "it was clear from the start that the application of sovereignty would be done only with agreement

from the United States," and that such approval was not forthcoming at present.²³ Other compelling explanations for the bottleneck include the limited appeal of annexation among Israelis, the potential regional and global repercussions of the move, and, for Trump, shifting attention to the exigencies of his campaign for a second term.²⁴

It is plausible, if not guaranteed, that both Likud and Blue-White are taking principled stands on the issue; Netanyahu never displayed much of a craving to annex the West Bank before or during his last decade as Israel's premier. That said, the credibility of Israel's government and its judgment are at rock bottom. Netanyahu has both disappointed members of his core constituency, who anticipated the imminent fulfillment of his sovereignty pledge, and given ballast to allegations that his commitments are disingenuous and cynical.²⁵ His alternate, Gantz, is disparaged by Likud and its satellites for not adhering to the conditions of the partnership that he forged with them, and also by his erstwhile advocates for propping up an indicted prime minister.

The fiasco has not abated just because elections were (temporarily) averted. Ashkenazi, meeting with his German counterpart, Heiko Mass, in Berlin on August 27, vowed that Israel had "moved from annexation to normalization," in the wake of the country's historic breakthrough with the United Arab Emirates (UAE).²⁶ Netanyahu's rebuttal came four days later. "I have not taken [sovereignty] off of the

17 "Peace to Prosperity," White House, January 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/peacetoprosperity/>; Raphael Ahren, "Cheering Trump Plan, Netanyahu Says He Will Start Annexation Process Sunday," *Times of Israel*, January 28, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/cheering-trump-plan-netanyahu-says-he-will-start-annexation-process-sunday/>.

18 "Upcoming Sunday Cabinet Meeting Cancelled amid Uncertainty over Annexation Plans," *Times of Israel*, January 31, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/upcoming-sunday-cabinet-meeting-cancelled-amid-uncertainty-over-annexation-plans/>; "Kushner on Israeli Annexation Plans: Not Now," *GZERO Media*, January 30, 2020, <https://www.gzeromedia.com/jared-kushner-interview-israel-palestine-middle-east-peace>.

19 Tovah Lazaroff, "Annexation as Early as July 1 under Netanyahu-Gantz Deal," *Jerusalem Post*, May 9, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/arab-israeli-conflict/annexation-as-early-as-july-1-under-netanyahu-gantz-deal-625304>.

20 Michael Bachner and Jacob Magid, "Gantz Tells US Envoys July 1 Annexation Start Date 'Not Sacred,'" *Times of Israel*, June 29, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/gantz-tells-us-envoys-july-1-annexation-start-date-not-sacred/>.

21 "Report: Israel's FM Quietly Working to Scuttle West Bank Annexation Plans," i24NEWS, June 23, 2020, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/1592917782-report-israel-s-fm-quietly-working-to-scuttle-west-bank-annexation-plans>.

22 Lahav Harkov, Tovah Lazaroff, and Omri Nahmias, "US Wants Gantz to Agree to Annexation This Summer," *Jerusalem Post*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/us-wants-gantz-to-agree-to-annexation-this-summer-630769>.

23 Tovah Lazaroff, "Netanyahu: US Has Kept Me from Annexing West Bank Settlements," *Jerusalem Post*, August 11, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/netanyahu-us-has-kept-me-from-annexing-west-bank-settlements-638191>.

24 Gil Hoffman, "'Post' Poll: Blue and White in Free Fall; Only 27% Back a July Annexation," *Jerusalem Post*, June 17, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/post-poll-blue-and-white-in-freefall-only-27-percent-back-a-july-annexation-631707>; Shalom Lipner, "Annexation and the Dubious Doctrine of Wishful Thinking," *American Interest*, June 30, 2020, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2020/06/30/annexation-and-the-dubious-doctrine-of-wishful-thinking/>.

25 Tovah Lazaroff, "Settlers Call for Netanyahu's Ouster, PM Charges They Gave up Sovereignty," *Jerusalem Post*, August 16, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/politics-and-diplomacy/settlers-call-for-netanyahus-ouster-pm-charges-they-gave-up-sovereignty-638885>.

26 Noa Landau and Reuters, "After Netanyahu Commits to Future Annexation, Trump Says It's 'Now off the Table,'" *Haaretz*, August 13, 2020, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/after-netanyahu-says-still-committed-to-annexation-trump-says-it-s-off-the-table-1.9071859>.

agenda,” he rejoined.²⁷ “I suggest that you wait patiently.” On September 1, Jamal Al Musharakh, the director of policy planning at the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, spoke to traveling Israeli press in Abu Dhabi of having received “assurances” that Israel would not proceed with annexation in the West Bank—although the *Times of Israel* conveyed, twelve days later, that Washington had undertaken to “hold off on giving its blessing for Israeli annexation” until only January 2024.²⁸ Israelis and others are invited to wait and discover who is telling the truth.

Either way, the chapter has been a study in malpractice. Netanyahu spent precious political capital to recruit US support for his ambitions of Israeli sovereignty, but was otherwise derelict in his duty. Agencies that would have been tasked with implementing the strategy—including the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), the Shin Bet, the National Security Council, and the Ministries of Justice and of Foreign Affairs—were not consulted.²⁹ Neighboring Jordan and other conservative Arab states defied optimistic predictions that they would not raise a ruckus. Assessments of Israeli public opinion were inaccurate, mistakenly presupposing approval—which did not exist—for annexation, with some of its strongest promoters even turning against Trump’s blueprint and calling it a “scam” that would imperil Israel’s security.³⁰ And, the critical backing of the United States was insufficiently robust for the prime minister to move ahead as he hoped. All the air has escaped from the balloon.

Political maneuvering to steer around approaching obstacles, but without actually effecting progress on any of the issues at stake, was precisely the dynamic that featured in last month’s budget showdown as well. The Knesset moved the goalposts by giving legislators four additional months to hammer out a formula for operating Israel’s economy, but, for all of the parliament’s special provisions, none of the underlying problems were rectified. A \$3.2-billion stopgap, approved on September 10, will not stop the bleeding.³¹

The haggling over revenues and expenses camouflaged a litany of other unrelated disputes that hamper the smooth execution of government. Netanyahu, with his sudden opposition to the concept of a two-year budget—which he himself had invented in 2009 and endorsed in 2020—exploited the deadlock to try and crack open the coalition deal between Likud and Blue-White, hoping ostensibly to negotiate a sweeter package for himself.³² According to media reports, chief among his objectives were insulating himself against disqualification from the post of alternate prime minister—assuming the not-foregone conclusion that he abides by the rotation arrangement with Gantz—and exercising control over senior civil-service appointments.³³ Foremost in the premier’s mind, one related narrative proposes, is his bid “to secure political immunity so he cannot be forced from office on competence grounds once his corruption trial moves into high gear.”³⁴

Netanyahu’s personal concerns notwithstanding, the prospect of a new budget remains elusive. The deafening commotion about an impending election has served to make rival politicians even less amenable than usual to cooper-

27 Tovah Lazaroff, “Netanyahu Pledges Annexation, Plans to Open School Year in a Settlement,” *Jerusalem Post*, August 31, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/netanyahu-pledges-annexation-plans-to-open-school-year-in-a-settlement-640647>.

28 Noa Landau, “Senior UAE Official: We Have U.S., Israeli Assurances Annexation Is Halted,” *Haaretz*, September 1, 2020, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-senior-uae-official-we-have-u-s-israeli-assurances-annexation-is-halted-1.9118997>; Jacob Magid, “US Assured UAE It Won’t Back Israel Annexation Before 2024 at Earliest, Tol Told,” *Times of Israel*, September 13, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-assured-uae-it-wont-back-israel-annexation-before-2024-at-earliest-toi-told>.

29 Judah Ari Gross, “Excluded from Netanyahu’s Annexation Plans, Military Must Somehow Prepare Anyway,” *Times of Israel*, June 5, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/excluded-from-netanyahus-annexation-plans-military-must-somehow-prepare-anyway>.

30 Ravit Hecht, “Settler Leader: Trump’s Plan Is a Scam, Netanyahu Will Establish a Palestinian State,” *Haaretz*, June 17, 2020, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium.MAGAZINE-settler-leader-trump-is-endangering-israel-netanyahu-will-establish-palestinian-st-1.8925311>.

31 Noa Landau, “Israel Still Without State Budget, but Cabinet Approves \$3.2 Billion in Increased Spending,” *Haaretz*, September 10, 2020, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-israel-without-state-budget-but-cabinet-approves-3-2-billion-in-increased-spending-1.9143731>.

32 Haviv Rettig Gur, “Seeking to Split 2-Year Budget, Netanyahu Must First Convince Gantz It’s No Trap,” *Times of Israel*, June 21, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/seeking-to-split-2-year-budget-netanyahu-must-first-convince-gantz-its-no-trap>; Steven Scheer, “New Israel Government to Approve 2020-2021 Budget in 90 Days,” *Nasdaq*, April 21, 2020, <https://www.nasdaq.com/articles/new-israel-government-to-approve-2020-2021-budget-in-90-days-2020-04-21>.

33 “Netanyahu Said Demanding Changes to Deal with Gantz to Keep Coalition Intact,” *Times of Israel*, August 11, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-said-demanding-changes-to-deal-with-gantz-to-keep-coalition-intact/>; Yossi Verter, “Netanyahu Is in Full-on Election Mode, Driven by His Present and Future Anxieties,” *Haaretz*, August 14, 2020, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-bibi-is-in-full-on-election-mode-driven-by-his-present-and-future-anxieties-1.9072873>.

34 Yonah Jeremy Bob, “What Is Netanyahu Really Nervous About? Spoiler: It’s Not the Budget,” *Jerusalem Post*, August 23, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/politics-and-diplomacy/what-is-netanyahu-really-nervous-about-spoiler-its-not-the-state-budget-639661>.

ation. Meanwhile, on August 30, Israel's budget director, Shaul Meridor, threw in the towel. In a scathing attack on his boss, Finance Minister Yisrael Katz, Meridor declared himself unwilling any longer to "offer legitimacy to a series of wrong decisions," faulting Katz for not allowing "me and other public servants...to do [the job] we know how to do."³⁵ Katz, retreating to the realm of proverbial deep statism, reciprocated by accusing Meridor of scheming to "overthrow the prime minister and harm the government."³⁶ As for the citizens of Israel, they are left with no budget, a gaping hole in their professional economic squad, and further distrust in the ability of their leaders to competently manage the affairs of state.

Israel's dramatic rapprochement with the UAE also fits neatly into this skewed paradigm. Israelis are manifestly enthusiastic about the upgrade in their bilateral relationship with the Gulf kingdom, which signals growing acceptance of Israel in the Middle East; one opinion survey found them preferring the agreement with the Emirates over West Bank annexation by a ratio of almost five to one.³⁷ (Factors tempering their excitement slightly include the perception that the agreement simply formalizes an already-existing reality and that the UAE, unlike Egypt and Jordan, has never actually maintained a war footing against Israel.³⁸) Prime Minister Netanyahu and UAE Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Abdullah bin Zayed signed a peace treaty at the White House on September 15.³⁹ None of this has shielded the Israeli government—or, more

specifically, Netanyahu—from homegrown charges of selfish negligence in shepherding the rollout of the Abraham Accord.⁴⁰

The trilateral dialogue involving the Emiratis and the Americans was piloted exclusively, on the Israeli side, by the prime minister himself. His most principal ministers—Gantz and Ashkenazi—were kept entirely in the dark until the deal was announced, despite the obvious relevance of their defense and foreign affairs briefs to the discussions.⁴¹ Netanyahu's peculiar explanation that he kept the information from Gantz and Ashkenazi, two former IDF chiefs of staff with access to Israel's most confidential secrets, for fear of leaks smacked of dishonesty and a crude desire to avoid sharing the glory of the moment with anyone else.⁴²

On a more substantive level, the absence of a comprehensive interagency process to vet the accord inevitably impacted the quality of the final product. Nowhere has this been more evident than with regard to the much-debated US sale of advanced F-35 stealth aircraft to the Emirates, a potential outcome of the normalization of ties between the UAE and Israel—and a development that has been assailed loudly by Israeli officials and experts who have objected strenuously to the transfer of top-shelf military technology to the kingdom.⁴³ At issue is the United States' long-standing guarantee to preserve Israel's qualitative military edge (QME), a critical component in the country's defense doctrine, which could conceivably be impaired if the F-35 were supplied to the UAE Air Force.⁴⁴

35 Hagay Hacohen, "Finance Ministry Budget Chief Quits, Furious with Katz's Behavior," *Jerusalem Post*, August 30, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/head-of-budget-department-in-finance-ministry-resigns-640493>.

36 Shalom Lipner, "Don't Fear the Deep State. It's the Shallow State That Will Destroy Us," *Foreign Policy*, February 4, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/02/04/dont-fear-the-deep-state-its-the-shallow-state-that-will-destroy-us-trump-theresa-may-netanyahu-brex-it-israel-populism/>; "Finance Minister Accuses Ex-Top Treasury Official of Seeking to Overthrow Netanyahu," *Haaretz*, August 31, 2020, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/finance-minister-accuses-ex-top-treasury-official-of-seeking-to-overthrow-netanyahu-1.9115162>.

37 "Poll: Nearly 80% of Israelis Prefer UAE Deal over West Bank Annexation," *Times of Israel*, August 16, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/poll-nearly-80-of-israelis-prefer-uae-deal-over-west-bank-annexation/>.

38 Noa Landau, "The New Normalization: What's Behind Israelis' 'Indifferent Support' for Historic UAE Deal: Opinion," *Haaretz*, August 31, 2020, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-the-new-normalization-why-are-israelis-so-indifferent-towards-the-historic-uae-deal-1.9114539>.

39 "UAE Foreign Minister Arrives in US for Israeli Peace Signing Ceremony," *Arab News*, September 13, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1734001/middle-east>.

40 "Remarks by President Trump Announcing the Normalization of Relations Between Israel and the United Arab Emirates," White House, August 13, 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-announcing-normalization-relations-israel-united-arab-emirates/>.

41 Gil Hoffman, "Netanyahu Told Likud MK about UAE deal but Left Gantz, Ashkenazi in Dark," *Jerusalem Post*, August 17, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/netanyahu-admits-he-kept-gantz-in-dark-on-uae-deal-due-to-fear-of-leaks-638926>.

42 Amnon Lord, "Netanyahu: My Efforts to Counter Iran Brought Us Closer to Arab Countries," *Israel Hayom*, August 17, 2020, <https://www.israelhayom.com/2020/08/17/netanyahu-my-efforts-to-counter-iran-brought-us-closer-to-arab-countries/>.

43 Noa Landau, "Israel Still Opposes F-35 Sale to UAE, Despite Normalization Deal, Senior Officials Say," *Haaretz*, August 18, 2020, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-senior-officials-despite-deal-israel-still-opposes-sale-of-f-35-jets-to-uae-1.9080632>.

44 William Wunderle and Andrew Briere, "U.S. Foreign Policy and Israel's Qualitative Military Edge," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 2008, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/u.s.-foreign-policy-and-israel-s-qualitative-military-edge-the-need-for-a-co>.



UAE Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Bahraini Minister of Foreign Affairs Dr. Abdullatif bin Rashid Al Zayani, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and US President Donald Trump on Tuesday, September 15, 2020, along the Colonnade of the White House on their way to sign the Abraham Accords on the South Lawn of the White House. *Source:* Official White House Photo by Tia Dufour

A banner headline in *Yediot Ahronot* trumpeted, on August 18, that a covert section of the Israeli-Emirati pact clears the path for the UAE to purchase F-35 jets and sophisticated drones from the United States.⁴⁵ Netanyahu fired back hastily on Twitter that the item was “fake news,” but his denial rang hollow once President Trump weighed in.⁴⁶ The procurement request, Trump told a White House press conference the next day, is “under review.”⁴⁷ His almost gleeful

testimony that the UAE has “definitely got the money to pay for it” shed apparent light on his personal order of priority.⁴⁸ Administration sources chimed in later to add that, in the words of a *New York Times* story from September 3, the prime minister’s “public statements [on this matter] were false.”⁴⁹ The avowal of Tzachi Hanegbi, Israel’s settlement affairs minister and a Netanyahu confederate, that Israel objects to the sale of “even one [F-35] screw” to any other

45 Nahum Barnea, “U.S. to Sell F-35 Jets to UAE as Part of Secret Clause in Israel Ties Agreement,” *ynetnews*, August 18, 2020, <https://www.ynetnews.com/article/SJYaHgKMP>.

46 Benjamin Netanyahu (@Netanyahu), “Yediot Ahronot published completely fake news today. Here are the facts and the truth,” Twitter, August 18, 2020, 3:56 a.m., <https://twitter.com/netanyahu/status/1295645634666659840>.

47 “Remarks by President Trump in Press Briefing,” White House, August 19, 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-press-briefing-august-19-2020/>.

48 Ibid.

49 Mark Mazzetti, Edward Wong, and Michael LaForgia, “Netanyahu Privately Condoned U.S. Plan to Sell Arms to U.A.E., Officials Say,” *New York Times*, September 3, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/03/us/politics/israel-uae-weapons.html>.

country in the region, implied that the prime minister was primed to hunker down.⁵⁰

“Continued friction over the F-35, or disagreements over whatever assurances may (or may not) have been afforded on the annexation issue, could complicate the blossoming friendship.”

It would not be fully unreasonable to assume that a transformative relationship between Israel and its former enemies would entail some realignment of its defense comportment. (Such a shift might even be desirable for Israel, which would benefit from better-outfitted allies in the event of open conflict with Iran.) The Mossad, allegedly, has even promoted the idea of making “classified and highly precise munitions” available to the Emirates.⁵¹ And, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, among others, has expressed the intent of the United States to provide the UAE with “the equipment that they need to secure and defend their own people...in a way that preserves our commitment to Israel as well.”⁵² But, Netanyahu’s conduct has crafted a situation that could become precarious for Israel.

The prime minister’s labors to wash his hands of any trace of complicity in the pending F-35 transaction already pro-

voked the Emiratis to back out of a public date between the Israeli, Emirati, and US ambassadors to the United Nations, which had been booked for August 25.⁵³ An Israeli delegation headed by National Security Advisor Meir Ben-Shabbat since concluded a successful trip to Abu Dhabi, but the cancellation of the photo opportunity in New York suggests that there could be more trouble in store.⁵⁴ Continued friction over the F-35, or disagreements over whatever assurances may (or may not) have been afforded on the annexation issue, could complicate the blossoming friendship.

Similarly, Netanyahu’s triumphal rhetoric, heralding a “victory [for] the doctrine of peace for peace,” runs the risk of backfiring.⁵⁵ His jubilation—while more than a little understandable under the circumstances—could put Israel’s fragile amity with its neighbors at risk, acting as a deterrent to Arab leaders who will wish to reject being portrayed as traitors to the Palestinian cause and to the conventional, if possibly outdated, “land for peace” formula.⁵⁶ Their reluctance to appear as if handing Israel “something for nothing,” as it were, was on full display during Secretary Pompeo’s recent Middle East shuttle, when the rulers of Sudan, Bahrain, and Oman all rebuffed his call for them to normalize their contacts with Israel.⁵⁷ One variable offsetting that may be a faltering Arab allegiance to the Palestinians, underscored by Bahrain’s subsequent decision to jump on the bandwagon and dispatch its foreign minister, Abdullatif bin Rashid Al Zayani, to attend the September 15 ceremony at the White House and sign a parallel peace deal with Israel.⁵⁸

All told, the UAE episode has left Israelis with the impression that Netanyahu was prepared to cut corners for the sake of scoring political points against his adversaries. (The F-35 saga has invoked shades of Netanyahu’s solo authorization last decade of a controversial sale of submarines

50 Judah Ari Gross, “Likud Minister: We Oppose Sale of ‘Even One Screw’ of the F-35 to UAE,” *Times of Israel*, August 25, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/minister-we-oppose-sale-of-even-one-screw-of-the-f-35-to-uae>.

51 Ibid.

52 “Secretary Michael R. Pompeo and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu After Their Meeting,” US Department of State, August 24, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-and-israeli-prime-minister-benjamin-netanyahu-after-their-meeting-2/>.

53 Marcy Oster, “UAE Cancels Public Meeting with US and Israel over Netanyahu’s Opposition to F-35 Sale,” Jewish Telegraphic Agency, August 24, 2020, <https://www.jta.org/quick-reads>.

54 “Meir Ben Shabbat Meets with Senior UAE and American Officials,” Prime Minister’s Office, August 31, 2020, https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/spoke_delegation310820.

55 “PM Netanyahu’s Remarks at His Press Conference,” Prime Minister’s Office, August 31, 2020, https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/event_press310820.

56 Aaron Boxerman, “‘Despicable, a Betrayal’: PA Blasts Emirates, Demands Retraction of Israel Deal,” *Times of Israel*, August 13, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/a-despicable-betrayal-pa-blasts-emirates-demands-retraction-of-israel-deal/>; Cody Levine, “Netanyahu: ‘Land for Peace’ Formula Ineffective for Middle East Peace,” *Jerusalem Post*, August 16, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/netanyahu-land-for-peace-formula-ineffective-for-middle-east-peace-638860>.

57 “Pompeo Heads Home after Pushing Israel Deal in Mideast Tour,” *ynetnews*, August 27, 2020, <https://www.ynetnews.com/article/S1gH4ZHmD>.

58 Danny Zaken, “Bahrain Follows UAE in Normalization with Israel,” *Globes*, September 13, 2020, <https://en.globes.co.il/en/article-bahrain-follows-uae-in-normalization-with-israel-1001342411>.

to Egypt.⁵⁹) The milestone could not have been achieved at a more opportune time for the prime minister, who was anxious to “compensate” for his sovereignty push marching straight into a brick wall, and to shift the spotlight from both the deleterious effects of the coronavirus on Israel and the hapless response of its government to the contagion.⁶⁰ A more disciplined approach to diplomacy would have undoubtedly been more beneficial to Israel’s national interests.

Disorganization and expediency have also been the hallmark of the Israeli leadership’s handling of COVID-19. Israel won high praise for its approach to the pandemic back in its first phase, when the country’s casualty rates were largely contained.⁶¹ Netanyahu asserted centralized control over all aspects of the enterprise, convening almost nightly briefings on prime-time television, and was poised to reap the windfall of Israel’s safe emergence from the event.⁶² Instead, he became the figurehead of Israel’s disastrous turn for the worse.

On May 26, Netanyahu broadcast that his government wanted to “make it possible for you to get out...so, first of all, have fun.”⁶³ Israelis took his cue and, once the floodgates were opened, Israel’s infection rates skyrocketed. According to a poll released in early September, 71 percent of Israelis graded the prime minister’s performance on the

illness as either “bad” or “very bad.”⁶⁴ Figures for the week ending September 2 placed Israel—averaging just shy of two hundred freshly confirmed cases of coronavirus each day—in the top spot globally for new infections per capita.⁶⁵ Israel went into a full, three-week lockdown on September 18, amid rampant confusion over the actual parameters of the closure, which some have called more porous than “Swiss cheese.”⁶⁶

The first positive diagnosis of the virus in Israel was recorded on February 21.⁶⁷ Little time would pass before Israelis began to lose faith that their government was focused principally on fighting the disease. On March 12, Netanyahu entreated Gantz to join him in creating an “emergency unity” coalition for the purpose of combating COVID-19, but, when Gantz finally acceded to the idea, the prime minister cut Blue-White out of the picture, allocating the key health and finance portfolios to Likud loyalists.⁶⁸

Accused by some of grandstanding before the cameras in order to outmaneuver Gantz, and to deflect attention from his own legal plight, Netanyahu has kept the alternate premier at arm’s length.⁶⁹ The two men squabble incessantly about how best to address the crisis, while Israel’s predicament grows increasingly desperate and an already-jaded public becomes more inclined to flout the government’s instructions; the willingness of Israelis to adhere to restrictions already took a hit when Netanyahu and other senior officials broke

59 Michael Bachner, “Ex-Mossad Chief: Netanyahu’s Version on Egypt Submarine Deal ‘Makes No Sense,’” *Times of Israel*, March 28, 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/ex-mossad-chief-netanyahus-version-on-egypt-submarine-deal-makes-no-sense/>.

60 Anshel Pfeffer, “In UAE Deal, Netanyahu Trades Imaginary Annexation for Real Life Diplomacy Win,” *Haaretz*, August 14, 2020, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-in-uae-deal-netanyahu-trades-imaginary-annexation-for-real-life-diplomacy-win-1.9071474>.

61 “Israel’s Coronavirus Approach Gets High Marks from Leading Magazine,” *Israel Hayom*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.israelhayom.com/2020/06/18/israels-coronavirus-success-gets-high-marks-from-leading-magazine/>.

62 Ido Efrati and Or Kashti, “Netanyahu Has Hijacked Israel’s Coronavirus Response, Sidelining Top Health Experts,” *Haaretz*, March 23, 2020, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-netanyahu-has-hijacked-israel-s-coronavirus-response-health-experts-say-1.8700250>.

63 “Netanyahu to Israelis: Have Fun, We’re Easing Coronavirus Restrictions,” *Jerusalem Post*, May 26, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/netanyahu-to-israelis-have-fun-were-easing-coronavirus-restrictions-629366>.

64 “Poll: Lapid Retains Leadership of Yesh Atid,” *Arutz Sheva*, September 3, 2020, <https://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/286562>.

65 “Israel Has Highest Rate in World of New Coronavirus Infections Per Capita—TV,” *Times of Israel*, September 4, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-has-highest-rate-in-world-of-new-coronavirus-infections-per-capita-tv>.

66 “Israel to Enter 3-Week Lockdown from Friday; Schools, Malls, Hotels to Be Closed,” *Times of Israel*, September 13, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-to-enter-3-week-lockdown-from-friday-schools-malls-hotels-to-be-closed>; Sever Plocker, “On Rosh Hashanah, Pray that Israel’s New ‘Closure’ Works,” *ynetnews*, September 18, 2020, <https://www.ynetnews.com/article/rkermGREv>.

67 “Israel Confirms First Coronavirus Case as Cruise Ship Returnee Diagnosed,” *Times of Israel*, February 21, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-confirms-first-coronavirus-case-as-cruise-ship-returnee-diagnosed/>.

68 Gil Hoffman, “Netanyahu, Gantz Start Bickering over Emergency Government,” *Jerusalem Post*, March 13, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/aryeh-deri-calls-for-emergency-unity-government-620694>.

69 Yossi Verter, “Sowing Fear amid the Coronavirus Outbreak, Netanyahu Is in His Element,” *Haaretz*, March 13, 2020, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-sowing-fear-amid-the-coronavirus-outbreak-netanyahu-is-in-his-element-1.8670207>.



A laborer disinfects and clears out notes left by worshippers in the cracks between the stones of the Western Wall, adjacent to the Temple Mount ahead of the Jewish New Year, in Jerusalem on September 16, 2020. *Source:* Reuters/Ronen Zvulun

their own orders against hosting family members during the Passover holiday in mid-April.⁷⁰ On July 23, Netanyahu and Health Minister Yuli Edelstein tapped Professor Ronni Gamzu, a former director general of the Ministry of Health, as project coordinator to sort out the mess.⁷¹

Consuming much of the bandwidth on the subject these days has been a sectarian mini-war that has pitted the popu-

lation of Israel's Ultra-Orthodox Jews—known in Hebrew as Haredim—against the bureaucracy, which stands charged by them of discriminatory behavior.⁷² Pummeled by the virus, the Ultra-Orthodox and their Knesset deputies have pushed back stridently against the draconian measures—and sometimes incendiary language—trained against their community and its lifeblood; Israel's Arab sector has been affected similarly by the spread of the contagion, but its lack

70 Sima Kadmon, "Israel's Leaders Have Betrayed the Public Trust," *ynetnews*, April 13, 2020, <https://www.ynetnews.com/article/Skj1Z8xd8>.

71 "Ronni Gamzu Appointed as Coronavirus Project Coordinator," *GOV.IL*, July 23, 2020, https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/23072020_01.

72 Benjamin Brown, "Orthodox Judaism," *Blackwell Companion to Judaism* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008).

of political clout seems to have generated less formidable pushback.⁷³

The Haredim are circling their wagons, complaining that their way of life is being curtailed while secular society is being exempted from responsibility. By their telling, preference had been given to reopening cultural venues and enabling Israelis to return to restaurants and beaches, while the resumption of synagogue prayer and yeshiva study was a lower priority for decision-makers.⁷⁴ The Haredim contend that the same freedom that permits anti-government demonstrators to congregate en masse, in the name of democracy, should enable them equally to congregate for religious purposes.

The sense of injustice that pervades the Ultra-Orthodox populace has been one contributing factor to what have been its deliberate violations of the law and talk of civil disobedience.⁷⁵ Before the summer, Housing and Construction Minister Yaakov Litzman, a Haredi parliamentarian and the health minister in Netanyahu's previous cabinet, flagrantly ignored the social-distancing guidance of his own ministry to the point of contracting the coronavirus himself.⁷⁶ More recently, thousands were in attendance for a crowded Hasidic wedding in Jerusalem on August 5.⁷⁷ In September, it was reported that Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky, a revered sage, had advised yeshiva

students against testing for the virus, fearing that the results might bring the reimposition of closures on Haredi institutions.⁷⁸ And, schools in some Haredi towns like Beitar Illit, with a high concentration of residents infected by COVID-19, chose to start classes, in defiance of the regulations.⁷⁹ It has not escaped the notice of Ultra-Orthodox Jews that they have borne the brunt of these indiscretions themselves.⁸⁰

Matters came to a head in the run-up to Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, which commenced on September 18. Litzman and his Haredi colleague Interior Minister Aryeh Deri undertook to thwart a full lockdown over the holiday, during which many Israelis visit local synagogues.⁸¹ Litzman's warning that the Haredi parties would bolt Netanyahu's coalition if such a curfew were enforced threatened to dominate—and contaminate—the process of determining how best to protect Israel's citizens.⁸² (Deri said later that a total shutdown was virtually inevitable, but, on September 22, announced that he would relinquish his cabinet post if synagogues were shuttered on Yom Kippur, which falls on September 27-28, while special dispensation was made for demonstrations.⁸³) The government had already caved to Ultra-Orthodox pressure on September 6, when it replaced plans for an initial full-scale closure of a handful of municipalities—many of them Haredi—with a strategy of nightly curfews in about forty cities with a more

73 Nathan Jeffay, "Two Ultra-Orthodox Bastions Account for 37% of Israel's Virus Deaths," *Times of Israel*, May 10, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/two-ultra-orthodox-bastions-account-for-37-of-israels-virus-deaths/>; Walter Bingham, "Is the Coronavirus Proliferation in Israel the Fault of the Haredi?" *Jerusalem Post*, May 2, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/is-the-coronavirus-proliferation-in-israel-the-fault-of-the-haredi-626664>; Adir Yanko and Alexandra Lukash, "Gamzu Slams Arab Community for 'Coronavirus Terrorism,'" *ynetnews*, August 16, 2020, <https://www.ynetnews.com/article/BKbWP8Mw>.

74 "Chief Rabbi Demands Immediate Reopening of Synagogues, Says Closure 'Baffling,'" *Times of Israel*, May 19, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/chief-rabbi-demands-immediate-reopening-of-synagogues-says-closure-baffling/>.

75 Cody Levine, "Bnei Brak Might End Cooperation with Gov't if It Enters Lockdown—Report," *Jerusalem Post*, September 5, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/bnei-brak-to-end-cooperation-with-govt-if-it-enters-lockdown-report-641145>.

76 "Report: Top Ministers Furious at Litzman for Flouting Coronavirus Rules," *i24NEWS*, April 5, 2020, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/1585851084-report-top-ministers-furious-at-litzman-for-flouting-coronavirus-rules>.

77 Aaron Rabinowitz, "Thousands Attend Ultra-Orthodox Wedding in Jerusalem, Violating Coronavirus Orders," *Haaretz*, August 6, 2020, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-thousands-of-hasidim-attend-wedding-in-jerusalem-violating-coronavirus-orders-1.9051584>.

78 "Top Ultra-Orthodox Rabbi Says Yeshiva Students Shouldn't Take COVID-19 Tests," *Times of Israel*, September 2, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/top-ultra-orthodox-rabbi-says-yeshiva-students-shouldnt-take-covid-19-tests>.

79 Hannah Brown, "Schools in Red City Beitar Illit Opened in Defiance of Coronavirus Cabinet," *Jerusalem Post*, September 1, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/schools-in-red-city-beitar-illit-opened-in-defiance-of-coronavirus-cabinet-640749>.

80 David Horowitz, "Litzman's Worst Failure—to Explain the Pandemic's Horrors to His Own Community," *Times of Israel*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/litzmans-worst-failure-to-explain-the-pandemics-horrors-to-his-own-community>.

81 Yoni Weiss, "Minister Rabbi Litzman: We Will Not Allow Chagim Lockdown," *Hamodia*, August 28, 2020, <https://hamodia.com/2020/08/28/minister-rabbi-litzman-will-not-allow-chagim-lockdown/>.

82 Ibid.

83 "Interior Minister Says Only Nationwide Lockdown Can Stem Virus Spread," *Times of Israel*, September 6, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/interior-minister-says-only-nationwide-lockdown-can-stem-virus-spread>; "Deri says he'll quit government if synagogues closed while protests permitted," *Times of Israel*, September 22, 2020, https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/deri-says-hell-quit-government-if-synagogues-closed-while-protests-permitted.

diverse, combined profile.⁸⁴ On September 13, with Israel's cabinet poised to render its impending decision in favor of the comprehensive closure, Litzman quit the government.⁸⁵ It remains to be seen whether his resignation, or the strictures of the current lockdown, ignites a wave of anti-government sentiment among his constituents.

“Israel’s COVID-19 scorecard tells of a policy failure, as political considerations prevail over public safety.”

Netanyahu’s imperative to mollify his Haredi partners extended all the way to the city of Uman, Ukraine, where the grave of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov is located. The site of a popular annual Rosh Hashanah pilgrimage, where throngs gather each year for prayer, introspection, and assorted festivities, Uman, judging from precedent, held the inherent potential of becoming a coronavirus incubator.⁸⁶ Fearing exactly such an outcome, Ronni Gamzu penned a letter in August to Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelensky, asking Ukraine to ban this year’s gathering.⁸⁷ Litzman slammed Gamzu summarily for overstepping his authority,

and the Haredi members of the Knesset shot off a letter to Netanyahu, beseeching the prime minister to facilitate a solution that would allow pilgrims to make the trip to Uman.⁸⁸ Netanyahu, faced with a Haredi revolt, hastened to form a ministerial committee to address the topic.⁸⁹

Israel’s COVID-19 scorecard tells of a policy failure, as political considerations prevail over public safety. An incensed citizenry wants its leaders to invest their time and resources in beating back the pandemic, and not be distracted by Uman or anything else.⁹⁰ The Ultra-Orthodox, who feel disrespected, are calling for Gamzu’s head.⁹¹ Professor Gamzu, foiled by politicians at every turn and struggling to fulfill his mission, is disgruntled about being the fall guy for government recklessness and giving serious thought to resigning his post.⁹² And, the virus continues to run amok—with the health minister and his deputy acknowledging that the latest lockdown is not expected to yield a significant decline in infection rates.⁹³

Reading the Tea Leaves

A potent brew of interrelated variables has conspired to sustain the mismanagement of Israel’s official business. Among the prominent catalysts of this dysfunction are Israel’s unique scheme of governance, changing demographics, the voracious appetite of the country’s legislators, and the disintegration of any checks and balances on the performance of government.

84 “Facing Haredi Rebellion, Ministers Approve Local Curfews Instead of Lockdowns,” *Times of Israel*, September 6, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/under-heavy-haredi-pressure-netanyahu-proposes-curfews-instead-of-lockdowns/>.

85 “Housing Minister Litzman Resigns in Protest of Looming Holiday Lockdown,” *Times of Israel*, September 13, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/housing-minister-litzman-resigns-in-protest-of-looming-holiday-lockdown>.

86 “Tens of Thousands Spend Rosh Hashanah in Uman,” *Hamodia*, September 23, 2017, <https://hamodia.com/2017/09/23/tens-thousands-spend-rosh-hashanah-uman/>.

87 “Israel’s Coronavirus Czar Urges Ukraine to Ban Jewish Pilgrimage,” *ynetnews*, August 22, 2020, <https://www.ynetnews.com/article/r1u2l0AzD>.

88 “Israeli Minister Slams Coronavirus Czar over Opposition to Uman Pilgrimage,” *i24NEWS*, August 23, 2020, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/coronavirus/1598162773-israeli-minister-slams-coronavirus-czar-over-opposition-to-uman-pilgrimage>; Aryeh Stern, “Agudas Yisrael to Netanyahu: Traveling to Uman for Chassidim Is a Basic Right,” *Hamodia*, August 19, 2020, <https://hamodia.com/2020/08/19/agudas-yisrael-netanyahu-traveling-uman-chassidim-basic-right/>.

89 “As Hasidim Join Protests, Netanyahu Sets Up Team to Seek Uman Solution,” *Times of Israel*, August 30, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/as-hasidim-join-protests-netanyahu-sets-up-team-to-seek-uman-solution>; “2 Tests, Set Groups, Supervised Quarantine: Ministers Said to Propose Uman Plan,” *Times of Israel*, September 6, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/2-tests-set-groups-supervised-quarantine-ministers-said-to-propose-uman-plan>.

90 Yaakov Katz, “Forget about Uman, We Have the Coronavirus to Fight,” *Jerusalem Post*, August 27, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/forget-about-uman-we-have-the-coronavirus-to-fight-640234>.

91 “Ultra-Orthodox Press Calls for Virus Czar’s Resignation over Rebuke of Top Rabbi,” *Times of Israel*, September 3, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/ultra-orthodox-press-calls-for-virus-czars-resignation-over-rebuke-of-top-rabbi>.

92 Shani Ashkenazi and Dan Zaken, “Politicians Thwart Gamzu as Covid-19 Cases Rise Sharply,” *Globes*, August 26, 2020, <https://en.globes.co.il/en/article-politicians-thwart-gamzu-as-covid-19-cases-rise-sharply-1001340704>; Maytal Yasur Beit-Or, Adi Hashmonai and Assaf Golan, “Commander of Israel’s War on Coronavirus Threatens to Resign,” *Israel Hayom*, August 26, 2020, <https://www.israelhayom.com/2020/08/26/commander-of-israels-war-on-coronavirus-threatens-to-resign>.

93 “Health Minister, Deputy Don’t Expect Lockdown to Cause Dramatic Infection Drop,” *Times of Israel*, September 16, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/health-minister-deputy-dont-expect-lockdown-to-cause-dramatic-infection-drop>.

The parliamentary system in Israel, with its relatively low electoral threshold of 3.25 percent, allows for manifold parties to enter the Knesset simultaneously; the present Knesset counts thirteen such groupings, some of them comprising multiple sub-factions.⁹⁴ This diffuseness of power complicates the formation of ruling coalitions in Israel, where parties representing particular communities can exert disproportional leverage and elevate their narrow interests above those of general society. An implicit understanding that dissatisfied parties are always prone to join the opposition and hasten the government's collapse compels a constant need to service their demands—even when prudence, as in the case of entitlements to a rapidly growing Haredi sector during the current medical emergency, may dictate differently.

Inflation of competing centers of authority typifies—and paralyzes—Israel's executive branch as well. The wholesale cannibalization of government ministries has seen new, artificial portfolios invented from scavenged scraps of vital and once nominally synergetic units such as the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Education. (These offshoots include the Ministry of Intelligence, the Ministry of Regional Cooperation, the Ministry of Strategic Affairs, the Ministry of Diaspora Affairs, and the Ministry of Culture and Sport.) This phenomenon has produced a cottage industry of ministers each aspiring to garner approval in their respective fiefdoms. Their natural contest for headlines acts as an impediment to efficient collaboration between their departments, many of whose boundaries are undefined, permeable, and nonsensical.

Israel's sitting thirty-fifth government boasts a record thirty-five ministers and another nine deputy ministers—a cohort larger than one third of the entire, 120-member parliament—occupying briefs such as “Community Strengthening and Advancement” and “Higher and Secondary Education and Water Resources.”⁹⁵ The cast is so bloated that it has

strained to locate conference halls large enough to accommodate its unruly meetings. Netanyahu, his associates explained in 2009, believes that “stability require[s] keeping as many politicians as possible content.” Meanwhile, incredulous Israelis are left to bemoan the exorbitant cost of maintaining this swollen infrastructure at a time when the economy is already buckling under the heavy weight of the coronavirus.⁹⁶

Compounding the danger to public welfare is the accountability deficit, which enables the government to operate almost unchecked. By virtue of his majority in the Knesset, the prime minister faces no significant legislative resistance to his agenda. The primary restraint on his otherwise unfettered exercise of control comes from the judiciary, whose influence Netanyahu and his allies have toiled unremittingly to circumscribe, maintaining that Israel's judges—who are not elected to the bench—have no mandate to circumvent the choices of Israel's democratically elected legislature.⁹⁷ If the court were to concede this argument, no institutional supervision—save the media and public opinion—would stand in the way of the ruling coalition.

In this reality, the vicissitudes of politics are king and expertise is relegated to the dungeon. Likud and Blue-White, each of them dedicated to stifling the other's signature initiatives, are engaged in an ongoing election campaign. Their inability to work together was epitomized in the cancellation of all weekly cabinet meetings throughout the month of August, with few expectations of anything constructive being accomplished if and when the government should reconvene routinely.⁹⁸ The ministerial committee for legislation, the forum in which the government determines how it will vote on legislative bills, is similarly padlocked owing to disputes between the two parties.⁹⁹

Operationally, Israel's top professional ranks are emptying out. An interim commissioner has commanded the Israel

94 “Elections for the Knesset,” Knesset, <https://main.knesset.gov.il/en/mk/pages/elections.aspx>; “Currently Functioning Parliamentary Groups,” Knesset, https://www.knesset.gov.il/faction/eng/FactionCurrent_eng.asp.

95 “Thirty-Fifth Government,” Knesset, <https://main.knesset.gov.il/en/mk/government/Pages/governments.aspx?govld=35>.

96 Gil Stern, “Netanyahu Not Afraid of Bloated Government,” *Jerusalem Post*, March 25, 2009, <https://www.jpost.com/israel/netanyahu-not-afraid-of-bloated-government>; Raoul Wootliff, “Price of Expanding Cabinet: Up to NIS 300m Just in Expenses and Bureaucracy,” *Times of Israel*, May 20, 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/price-of-expanding-cabinet-up-to-nis-300m-just-in-expenses-and-bureaucracy>.

97 “Rallying around Netanyahu Before Trial, Likud Lawmakers Lash Legal System,” *Times of Israel*, May 24, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/rallying-around-netanyahu-before-trial-likud-lawmakers-lash-legal-system>.

98 Jeremy Sharon, “Cabinet Meeting to Be Held for First Time in Five Weeks,” *Jerusalem Post*, September 5, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/cabinet-meeting-to-be-held-for-first-time-in-five-weeks-641191>.

99 Jonathan Lis, “Ministerial Meeting Slated for Sunday Canceled Due to Ongoing Feud in Israel's Coalition,” *Haaretz*, September 5, 2020, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-ministerial-meeting-slated-for-sunday-canceled-due-to-ongoing-coalition-feud-1.9131868>.



US President Donald Trump delivers remarks with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Tuesday, January 28, 2020, in the East Room of the White House to unveil details of the Trump administration's Middle East Peace Plan. *Source:* Official White House Photo by Shealah Craighead

Police since December 2018.¹⁰⁰ Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit is doubling as a surrogate state attorney (i.e., chief prosecutor); the last officeholder retired in December 2019. Joining Israel's budget director on the unemployment line is Accountant General Roni Hizkiyahu, who announced

his resignation in July.¹⁰¹ The vacuum has a corrosive effect on the field of candidates for permanent slots who, until appointments are made finally, are under pressure to cater to the not-always-legitimate wishes of the political masters of their fate.

¹⁰⁰ "Acting Police Chief Says No Permanent Appointment Anytime Soon—Report," *Times of Israel*, August 27, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/acting-police-chief-says-no-permanent-appointment-anytime-soon-report>.

¹⁰¹ Amiram Barkat, "Accountant General Rony Hizkiyahu Steps Down," *Globes*, July 26, 2020, <https://en.globes.co.il/en/article-accountant-general-rony-hizkiyahu-steps-down-1001337234>.

The absence of a budget leaves the state of Israel incapacitated. An automatic budget protocol prescribes that the government must continue to function on the basis of monthly allocations totaling one twelfth of its last budget; Israel's last budget, passed on March 15, 2018, was the product of a COVID-19 era whose priorities differed drastically from those of today.¹⁰² Without an authorized framework for ordering the country's finances beyond the scope of a few weeks, ministries and statutory agencies cannot enter into long-term projects and commitments. Uncertainty trickles down to private-sector entities with public contracts and to nonprofits reliant on government grants. Irregular distributions, such as the payment of jobless benefits through next summer and other assistance to a pandemic-stricken citizenry, fall under the specter of politicians hoping to find favor in the eyes of voters.¹⁰³ The overall instability of Israel's economic climate inflicts damage on its credit rating, confounding efforts to raise funds and attract foreign investment.¹⁰⁴

Plotting a New Course

Benjamin Netanyahu is the longest-running prime minister in Israel's seventy-two-year history. Children born after March 2009, more than eleven years ago, have never known another politician atop the country's government. Conventional wisdom has suggested that there is "no alternative" to his leadership, a view that was lent credence

by Likud election posters portraying him—under the slogan "Another League"—alongside Trump, Russia's President Vladimir Putin and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi.¹⁰⁵ He has ward off all challengers—both within his party and without—to his dominance.¹⁰⁶ During Netanyahu's tenure, Israel has witnessed unprecedented diplomatic and economic feats.¹⁰⁷ But, with the pillars of Israel's democracy under assault and a hazardous breakdown in the government's decision-making procedures, more and more Israelis can be heard discussing lineup changes.¹⁰⁸

Talk in Israel of the need for government reform is, not coincidentally, synchronized with the closing stages of the 2020 US elections. Netanyahu has put Israel's eggs squarely in Trump's basket, and the credible prospect of a Joe Biden administration has set Israelis wondering whether a different prime minister would be better endowed to rebuild Israel's ties with the Democratic Party.¹⁰⁹ The symbiotic relationship between Netanyahu and Trump, both employing the same language against their adversaries and starring in each other's campaigns, has moved Israel into perilous partisan space in the United States, whose bipartisan support for Israel remains fundamental to the Jewish state's survival and prosperity.¹¹⁰

Beyond ensuring that its bonds with the United States are insulated from any transfer of power, Israel should take

102 Jonathan Kershnerbaum, "Who Rules the Budget?" *Davar*, October 6, 2019, <https://en.davar1.co.il/196747/>; "Knesset Gives Final Approval to 2019 State Budget," Knesset, March 15, 2018, https://m.knesset.gov.il/EN/News/PressReleases/pages/Pr13814_pg.aspx.

103 "Joint Prime Minister's Office-Finance Ministry Statement," Prime Minister's Office, July 13, 2020, https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/spoke_joint_statement130720.

104 "Treasury Reportedly Warns Failure to Pass State Budget Could Hurt Credit Rating," *Times of Israel*, August 2, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/treasury-reportedly-warns-failure-to-pass-state-budget-could-hurt-credit-rating>.

105 Aluf Benn, "'There's No Alternative to Netanyahu; Our Democracy Is Safe,' Says Israel's Top Public Policy Expert," *Haaretz*, July 17, 2020, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium.MAGAZINE-israel-s-top-policy-expert-there-s-no-alternative-to-netanyahu-democracy-is-safe-1.8998987>; Gil Hoffman, "Likud Adorns HQ with Trump, Putin, Modi," *Jerusalem Post*, July 28, 2019, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/likud-adorns-hq-with-trump-putin-modi-597009>.

106 "Netanyahu Quashes Likud Leadership Challenge from Sa'ar with over 72%," *Times of Israel*, December 27, 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-declares-victory-in-likud-primary-appears-headed-for-landslide-win>.

107 Elliott Abrams, "Is Israel's International Isolation Diminishing?" Council on Foreign Relations, January 17, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/israels-international-isolation-diminishing>; John McKenna, "Israel is a Tech Titan. These 5 Charts Explain Its Startup Success," World Economic Forum, May 19, 2017, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/05/tiny-israel-is-a-tech-titan-these-5-charts-explain-its-startup-success/>.

108 David Horowitz, "Don't Mess with Israel's Democracy," *Times of Israel*, October 23, 2017, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/dont-mess-with-israels-democracy>.

109 PM of Israel (@IsraelPM), "We've had no better friend than President Trump. That friendship is expressed in the fact that we're in the American Embassy in Jerusalem, that Jerusalem was recognized by President Trump as Israel's capital, that President Trump has recognized Israel's sovereignty over the Golan" Twitter, January 23, 2020, 2:37 p.m., <https://twitter.com/IsraelPM/status/1220430396233539589>; Amir Tibon, "Biden: Netanyahu Is Drifting to the 'Extreme Right' to Stay in Power," *Haaretz*, December 8, 2019, <https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/biden-netanyahu-is-drifting-to-the-extreme-right-to-stay-in-power-1.8230453>.

110 Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), "The 'protesters' are actually anarchists who hate our Country. The line of innocent 'mothers' were a scam that Lamestream refuses to acknowledge, just like they don't report the violence of these demonstrations!" Twitter, June 26, 2020, 6:37 p.m., <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1287517470497083393>; Jonathan Lis, "Netanyahu: Protesters Against Me Are Anarchists, Not Victims of Pandemic," *Haaretz*, August 5, 2020, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-netanyahu-protesters-against-me-are-anarchists-not-victims-of-pandemic-1.9049383>; "Netanyahu Uses Trump in Election Campaign Poster," *Times of Israel*, February 3, 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-uses-trump-in-election-campaign-posters>; Marcy Oster, "Republican Jewish Coalition launches \$50,000 pro-Trump Ad Campaign," *Times of Israel*, June 21, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/republican-jewish-coalition-launches-50000-pro-trump-ad-campaign>.

active measures to guarantee that its policy apparatus delivers the best possible outputs for Israelis. Anything less would constitute a violation of their sacred trust. Working outside the box, a time-honored Israeli tradition that has sponsored some of Israel's greatest accomplishments, may have discovered its limits.

Recommendations for elements of a “best-practice regime” fall mostly under the rubric of common sense and are applicable not only in the context of Israel, but that of the United States and other countries as well. These steps should include the following.

- *Subordinating political considerations to practical concerns.* Stewards of government should be focused on serving the public good above all else. Indulging personal needs for publicity and promotions perverts the mission of government—which is not an enterprise for soloists—and generates defective outcomes. The fact that Israel has botched its treatment of the Trump deal, has passed no budget, has fumbled the F-35 issue, and has failed to contain the spread of the coronavirus can be ascribed, in some degree, to wars of political supremacy and credit, as well as to undue favoritism extended to placate special-interest groups.
- *Restoring public credibility through personal example.* Lax compliance with COVID-19 directives, and the consequent upsurge in infection rates, can be attributed partly to the dismal example set by public figures. Slow in following their own instructions, but quick to criticize the public for doing likewise, officials who have entertained guests against the rules, shown little discipline for wearing masks, and broken quarantine are sending a cynical message to Israelis that guidelines are arbitrary.¹¹¹ When Israel closed its skies, exemptions made for the likes of billionaire entrepreneurs and yeshiva students disclosed a double standard.¹¹² One rule for everyone will encourage people to adhere to both the letter and the spirit of the law.
- *Assessing the playing field realistically.* Wishful thinking is not a strategy. Netanyahu's declarations

on applying Israeli law in the West Bank, and his insistence that he had not consented to the supply of cutting-edge armaments to the UAE, suggest that he was getting ahead of himself. Events soon revealed that the United States would not accept the extension of Israeli sovereignty, and that the United States and the UAE were advertising an alternative view of the normalization agreement with Israel. Leaving too many open ends in the discussion of these matters put Netanyahu in an embarrassing position and compromised Israel's integrity.

- *Preparing for contingencies through due diligence.* Thorough staff work that engages professional advice from experienced hands enhances the probability of achieving robust results. Excluding policy expertise from the process consigns decisions, by default, to a tight cadre of confidants who often lack sufficient knowledge of relevant dealings from the past. Annexation, the gridlocked budget, and the battle against COVID-19 are all debacles that might have been mitigated through greater appreciation for competent counsel. In the case of the UAE agreement, Israel's defense establishment is now rushing to catch up to the curve.¹¹³ Here, again, the impetus to monopolize credit and to favor intergovernmental competition over teamwork undermined the welfare of the nation. The prevalence of interim or acting principals in both Israel and the United States is detrimental to cultivating a stable work environment, in which government personnel concentrate foremost on the tasks at hand.

The palpable malaise that has descended upon Israel means that the possibility of a fourth election, bred of hopelessness, cannot be dismissed entirely. And yet, Israelis have become wont to say that the last thing that their country requires is another ballot. It would bear a hefty price tag—in a time of economic distress, no less—and hardly promise a different upshot than the hung jury of the last three ballots. In fact, it is Netanyahu who actually stands the best chance of eking out victory and returning as prime minister. With a severely weakened Gantz, rivals such as Yesh Atid's Yair Lapid and Yamina's Naftali Bennett—who have both tried

111 “Netanyahu defends quarantine-breaking aides, chiding ‘selective enforcement,’” *Times of Israel*, September 21, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-defends-quarantine-breaking-aides-chiding-selective-enforcement>.

112 “Health Ministry Excused Teddy Sagi from Isolation,” *Globes*, June 10, 2020, <https://en.globes.co.il/en/article-health-ministry-excused-teddy-sagi-from-isolation-1001331992>; “Dozens of Chabad Members Test Positive for Corona after Visit to Brooklyn,” *Israel Hayom*, March 23, 2020, <https://www.israelhayom.com/2020/03/23/dozens-of-chabad-members-test-positive-for-corona-after-visit-to-brooklyn/>.

113 Anna Ahronheim, “Israel's Defense Ministry Views UAE-US Arms Deal as ‘Almost Done Deal,’” *Jerusalem Post*, September 6, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/israels-defense-ministry-views-uae-us-arms-deal-as-almost-done-deal-641232>.

“The steady rise in the polls of Naftali Bennett—whose ticket has become sharp condemnation of the prime minister’s performance—may have been the prime deterrent holding Netanyahu back from calling a snap election over the budget.”

before and failed to best Netanyahu—and a Joint Arab List that even Gantz balked at bringing into a coalition, it is not unlikely that many of the harmful behaviors currently on display would then continue under a successor government.

But, change could be in the wind. Netanyahu, for as long as he manages to hold on to the reins of power, may finally be forced to improve his game. The steady rise in the polls of Naftali Bennett—whose ticket has become sharp condemnation of the prime minister’s performance—may have been the prime deterrent holding Netanyahu back from calling a snap election over the budget.¹¹⁴ The threat of Bennett, and Netanyahu’s difficulty in convincing an embittered public that he himself would not be to blame if elections were to be moved forward, may bring the prime minister to heel.¹¹⁵ With a packed roster of items, including the menace of an apparent escalation in tensions with Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza, demanding the undivided attention of Israel’s chief executive, that would be a positive development indeed.¹¹⁶

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114 “Poll: Yamina Would Surge to 21 Seats, Majority Think Netanyahu Caved to Haredim,” *Times of Israel*, September 7, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/poll-yamina-would-surge-to-21-seats-majority-think-netanyahu-caved-to-haredim/>; “Bennett Intensifies Attacks, Says Netanyahu Only Concerned with His Trial,” *Times of Israel*, September 1, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/bennett-intensifies-attacks-says-netanyahu-only-concerned-with-his-trial/>.

115 Gil Hoffman, “68% Say Fourth Election Would Be Netanyahu’s Fault—Poll,” *Jerusalem Post*, August 7, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/politics-and-diplomacy/68-percent-say-election-would-be-netanyahus-fault-jerusalem-post-group-poll-637759>.

116 “Nasrallah Threatens Killing IDF Soldier in Retaliation for Death of Hezbollah Member,” i24NEWS, August 30, 2020, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/diplomacy-defense/1598782747-nasrallah-threatens-killing-idf-soldier-in-retaliation-for-death-of-hezbollah-member>; Tzvi Joffe, “IDF Strikes Hamas Targets as Haniyeh Demands End to Blockade,” *Jerusalem Post*, August 30, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/arab-israeli-conflict/hamas-leader-we-wont-stop-until-blockade-is-completely-lifted-640426>.



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