

To Win Re-Election, Bibi Netanyahu Is Waging ‘Wars’ at Home and Abroad

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Articles & Testimony

Publicizing IDF operations, threatening to annex the West Bank, and making alarmist statements about polling stations and the press may help him eke out a victory, but at what cost to Israel’s security and standing?

Benjamin Netanyahu is firing in all directions these days. Facing a tight re-election bid next Tuesday, the long-serving Israeli prime minister has just in the last two weeks launched air strikes against multiple neighboring Middle Eastern countries, pushed back against a potential U.S.-Iran detente, attacked the local media and his own Arab citizens, and called into question the legitimacy of the entire electoral process. In a bid for every last right-wing vote, on Tuesday Netanyahu again promised to annex wide swaths of the West Bank if he were re-elected—a move that if implemented could spell the end of any two-state solution with the Palestinians and, with it, the end of Israel as both a democratic and Jewish state.

The impression is either of a master strategist in complete control, pulling multiple political, military and diplomatic strings both here and abroad; or, alternatively, a hysterical politician in the twilight of his reign doing everything within his ample powers to maintain a grip on power. There is, of course, the likelihood that it’s both.

The military dimension to Netanyahu’s recent offensive is arguably the most consequential precisely because it’s so out of character. Despite his hardline international reputation, Netanyahu is extremely cautious when it comes to the use of force. Yet, in the span of 24 hours late last month, Israeli aircraft reportedly struck Iranian-affiliated targets in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq.

In recent years Israel has admitted openly to launching hundreds of strikes inside Syria to forestall what officials here call Iran’s “military entrenchment” in its war-torn neighbor: Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps personnel, Shiite militia fighters, and [advanced weaponry like precision guided missiles](#)

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-precision-missile-project-moves-to->

Lebanon). Such Israeli military action—officially termed the “[campaign between wars](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-campaign-between-wars-how-israel-rethought-its-strategy-to-counter-iran)” (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-campaign-between-wars-how-israel-rethought-its-strategy-to-counter-iran>),” since it’s intended to shear Iranian power ahead of any wider conflict—has now extended into Lebanon and Iraq.

How do we know this? Because Netanyahu confirmed it.

“I’m doing everything to protect the security of our country from all directions—from the north against Lebanon and [the pro-Iranian militia] Hezbollah, in Syria against Iran and Hezbollah, and unfortunately also in Iraq against Iran,” Netanyahu said on August 30 [during a Facebook live chat](https://twitter.com/kann_news/status/1167450772231139330) (https://twitter.com/kann_news/status/1167450772231139330) with supporters, days after the reported strikes in those three countries.

A “senior Israeli defense source,” likely Netanyahu himself (who currently also doubles as defense minister), [repeated similar claims](https://twitter.com/NeriZilber/status/1168526990007312384) (<https://twitter.com/NeriZilber/status/1168526990007312384>) a few days later to local military reporters. Indeed, the Israeli military has been extremely expansive in recent weeks detailing Iran’s efforts to arm Hezbollah with precision guided missiles on Lebanese soil. A drone attack in Beirut, in the heart of Hezbollah’s Dahiyeh stronghold, [reportedly targeted high-value equipment](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-will-hezbollah-respond-to-israels-drone-attack) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-will-hezbollah-respond-to-israels-drone-attack>) meant to upgrade the Lebanese militia’s arsenal. Here, too, the military briefed reporters on the exact details of what allegedly was hit.

This was all a sharp break from Israel’s usual policy of “purposeful ambiguity,” wherein it declines to take responsibility when something mysteriously blows up across the border—thus sparing its enemies blushes so as to avoid pushing them towards a response. (A limited response ultimately did come on September 1 in the form of a cross-border Hezbollah attack on an Israeli army jeep.)

To be clear: not even Netanyahu’s harshest domestic critics allege that, mere weeks before an election, he’s purposefully pushing the country into war. As The Daily Beast [reported in February](https://www.thedailybeast.com/to-target-israel-irans-suitcase-gps-kits-turn-hezbollah-rockets-into-guided-missiles) (<https://www.thedailybeast.com/to-target-israel-irans-suitcase-gps-kits-turn-hezbollah-rockets-into-guided-missiles>), there is widespread consensus that Iranian proxies armed with upgraded precision guided missiles are a severe threat to the country’s security, now deemed second only to Iran’s possible pursuit of a nuclear weapon. Most Netanyahu critics even accept the official position that the timing for these strikes was due to Iran’s escalating efforts in this area (primarily [recent inroads in Iraq](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/militias-are-threatening-public-safety-in-iraq) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/militias-are-threatening-public-safety-in-iraq>) and Lebanon).

What they do take issue with, however, is Netanyahu’s non-stop public rhetoric after the fact—verging on a Middle Eastern “end zone dance” in the face of Iran and Hezbollah—that could lead to deadlier follow-up attacks and a wider conflagration. Israel until recently used to speak softly and carry a big stick, which it deployed to great effect against Iran and its regional proxies. Netanyahu is now publicly trading insults with Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah and IRGC Gen. Qassem Soleimani, who have vowed to respond in kind.

Netanyahu’s chief rival, Benny Gantz, head of the Blue and White party, has strongly supported the government’s regional policy against Iran. Yet even he called into question the increasing “talk and breaking of the [prior] ambiguity,” saying Netanyahu is trying to “score political points” off of the national security debate.

Ron Ben-Yishai, the dean of Israel’s military correspondents going back five decades, told The Daily Beast that even a prime minister-cum-defense minister doesn’t plan operations, the motivating force for which is usually the military and Mossad, Israel’s foreign intelligence agency. Netanyahu, Ben-Yishai said, “wouldn’t launch an operation because of an election, and the army chief of staff isn’t a servant of any prime minister...but the talk [surrounding it]

is without doubt political.”

The danger of all this talk, Ben-Yishai added, is that it’s like “poking [Iran in] the eye. Especially in the Middle East, the issue of honor could lead to a response.”

Nevertheless, after years burnishing his reputation as Israel’s “Mr. Security,” an election campaign dominated by military crises could help Netanyahu with his base and the many undecided voters. But part of the audience for all this mounting “blather,” as some have termed it, may in fact be farther afield.

The same weekend that Israel was bombing across the Levant, President Donald Trump was at the G-7 summit in France, where he indicated a willingness to meet with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani to resolve the impasse over Iran’s nuclear program. A short while after Trump made positive comments about Iran, Netanyahu issued a video where he reminded the world (including, presumably, the U.S. president) of where he stood on the issue.

“Iran is working on a broad front to carry out murderous terrorist attacks against the State of Israel,” **Netanyahu said (<https://twitter.com/netanyahu/status/1166032485618241536?s=20>)**. “Israel will continue to defend its security however that may be necessary. I call on the international community to act immediately so that Iran halts these attacks.”

As **Axios reported (<https://www.axios.com/scoop-netanyahu-trying-to-reach-trump-to-block-zarif-meeting-85a6a92d-51fa-4d55-bb79-e5163b0706ce.html>)**, Netanyahu was unable to reach Trump by telephone during the G-7 summit. In the following days the Israeli prime minister had calls with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Vice President Mike Pence—but tellingly not with Trump.

A snap visit to London last week, primarily to meet with U.S. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, likely failed to console the Israeli leader. “Iran,” Esper said, “was inching toward that place where we could have talks.” Senior British officials with whom Netanyahu met were also inclined to support a French-led diplomatic process. **Israeli defense officials reportedly are convinced (<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-trump-rohani-summit-is-a-done-deal-israeli-defense-officials-believe-1.7808274>)** that a Trump-Rouhani summit is now a “done deal.”

Trump on Tuesday reiterated his **openness to meeting (<https://twitter.com/ThisWeekABC/status/1171146101837058048?s=20>)** with the Iranian leader, despite Netanyahu just hours earlier revealing what he claimed was a secret Iranian nuclear weapons facility (another cynical use, many Israeli analysts observed, of sensitive intelligence for political gain.) Earlier on Tuesday, Trump fired his ultra-hawkish national security advisor, John Bolton, saying he “disagreed strongly with many of his suggestions.”

A lot is riding on whether Netanyahu can maintain U.S. support for his hard line against Iran and its proxies—not least his own political future. Israelis will again go to the polls on September 17 after Netanyahu failed to form a government in the wake of the original April ballot. According to the polls, Netanyahu is once more in a very tight race for re-election. He has in recent weeks seemingly stopped at nothing to ensure that his now 10-year reign (thirteen overall dating back to the 1990s) continues.

Massive banners of Netanyahu and Trump shaking hands adorn tall office buildings and billboards across the country, underlining the premier’s close relationship with the U.S. president and his overall image as a global statesman (including taking credit for the American withdrawal from the Obama-era nuclear deal). Both points would be severely undercut if there were, in fact, a U.S.-Iran rapprochement.

Just as he’s attacked Iran across the region, Netanyahu with equal vigor has gone after his perceived domestic enemies. He has called for a boycott of the country’s most popular television station—Channel 12—because it has deigned to publish extensive leaks from inside the myriad investigations of Netanyahu’s alleged corruption. “A

terror attack against democracy,” the prime minister termed it. The channel’s legal correspondent, Guy Peleg, **now travels with bodyguards (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-accuses-channel-12-owners-of-terror-attack-against-democracy/>)**.

More perniciously, in a Trumpian twist, Netanyahu in the last week has railed constantly against voter fraud among Israel’s Arab minority, alleging that irregularities in this demographic cost him and his right-wing allies victory in April. “The problem of fraud and theft of the elections is real. We will not allow the coming elections to be stolen,” Netanyahu said, priming his supporters to reject the outcome of next week’s poll if it doesn’t go their way.

No matter that the Central Elections Committee, police, attorney general, and other neutral observers say no such fraud actually took place and reject Netanyahu’s demand that cameras be placed in polling stations. Israeli President **Reuven Rivlin called the allegations (<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/elections/.premium-netanyahu-s-likud-alleged-over-100-instances-of-election-fraud-only-one-was-legit-1.7808394>)**

“unsubstantiated and even irresponsible political attacks” intended to “undermine public trust in these [electoral] bodies.”

It seems that Netanyahu is willing to attack the very foundations of Israeli democracy, and again incite against the country’s Arab minority in order to galvanize his nationalist base. It’s a well-worn tactic Netanyahu has deployed in the past—the so-called Gevalt campaign, Yiddish for “alarm.”

“Gevalt is always real and Netanyahu is a panicker to begin with, which is probably what makes him so effective [as a politician],” Tal Shalev, Walla News’ chief political correspondent, told The Daily Beast. “He’s never calm.” Yet Shalev, a keen Netanyahu-watcher who traveled with him to London, said that despite the public hysteria purposefully sown, the prime minister seemed calm, confident and in a good mood in recent days.

There’s a contrast between what he’s broadcasting to those around him and what he’s saying publicly, she added. “But he’s acting a bit more ruthless than usual now, and breaking all the rules, due to the situation he’s in. It’s a battle for the rest of his life.”

Without his right-wing bloc of parties winning an outright majority of 61 seats in the Knesset, Netanyahu could be finished politically—and then there are his looming corruption indictments, with a pre-trial hearing set for early next month. A former ally on the right, Avigdor Lieberman, has turned against him, forcing the repeat election in the first place and now demanding a national unity government with Blue and White—which the latter refuse to countenance so long as the legally compromised Netanyahu still heads the Likud party. The political machinations after September 17 could be even more extreme than the election campaign itself.

Yet there’s another possibility, perhaps even more likely, that against all the odds, and all these enemies—some real, most manufactured—Netanyahu actually wins outright. The polls aren’t looking favorable, but it’s important to recall that in the April ballot, a small right-wing faction was only 1400 votes short (out of 4 million cast) of entering parliament and thereby giving Netanyahu his majority. Last time, too, the right wing essentially threw away six to eight seats via parties that didn’t pass the electoral threshold, **a scenario now mitigated (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/zehut-bows-out-of-elections-after-netanyahu-promises-feiglin-a-cabinet-post/>)** by a recent Netanyahu pact with a far-right faction that pulled out of the election.

A source in Blue and White told The Daily Beast that the current polls, both public and internal, were very consistent—a Netanyahu victory isn’t a done deal. “This is going to be close, and will come down to the last few days,” he vowed. With the margins so fine, Netanyahu is pushing Israel to the very edge.

Neri Zilber, a journalist based in Tel Aviv, is an adjunct fellow with The Washington Institute and a senior fellow at BICOM. This article was originally published on the [Daily Beast website \(<https://www.thedailybeast.com/israeli-prime-minister-benjamin-netanyahus-bid-for-re-election-includes-wars-at-home-and-abroad>\)](https://www.thedailybeast.com/israeli-prime-minister-benjamin-netanyahus-bid-for-re-election-includes-wars-at-home-and-abroad). ❖

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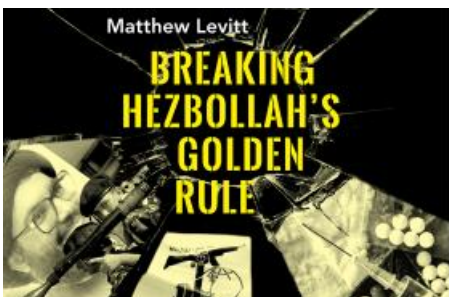
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