

How Bibi's Bestie at the White House Is Helping Him Win the Israeli Election

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Mar 25, 2019

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Articles & Testimony

President Trump's recent Golan announcement and photo-op with Netanyahu could draw more voters to the beleaguered prime minister's side.

For Israeli leader Benjamin Netanyahu, Donald Trump is the gift that keeps on giving. The U.S. president will host Netanyahu at the White House today, helping him deflect attention from corruption scandals just 15 days ahead of a key election at home. Late last week, Trump recognized Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights, upending decades of U.S. foreign policy and reminding Israeli voters that no one on the Israeli political scene has Netanyahu's standing in Washington.

Netanyahu is **locked in a tight race** (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/02/08/the-bibi-slayer-benny-gantz-benjamin-netanyahu-israel/>) against Benny Gantz, a former army chief of staff. The latest polls have Gantz's Blue and White party leading Netanyahu's Likud. Trump's announcement regarding the Golan, a commanding slit of elevated land conquered from Syria in the 1967 war and annexed by Israel in 1981, is **undoubtedly a boon** (<https://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/politics-government/white-house/article228242449.html>) for the long-serving incumbent's re-election chances. "While the entire democratic world sees Trump as an unfortunate historic accident, a harmful, childish imp, for Netanyahu, the U.S. president is ... his own private Santa Claus, all year long," **wrote Yossi Verter** (<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/elections/.premium-trump-once-again-proves-that-he-s-netanyahu-s-private-santa-claus-1.7044948>), *Haaretz's* veteran political columnist.

Of course, Trump in a **recent interview** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nBe-ldHoJYQ>) denied the connection to Netanyahu's electoral prospects. "I wouldn't even know about that. ... I have no idea. I hear he's doing okay," he said.

In truth, though, the Israeli prime minister has been dogged by corruption allegations, with the attorney general last month deciding to indict him on a slew of charges including bribery (contingent on a hearing after the election).

Compounding matters, Gantz has joined forces with two other retired military commanders as well as former Finance Minister Yair Lapid, a formidable campaigner, loosening Netanyahu's stranglehold on the image of "Mr. Security." A rocket fired from Gaza early this morning struck a home in central Israel, injuring seven. In response, Netanyahu is cutting his Washington visit short, heading back today after his White House meeting to handle the escalating crisis.

Nevertheless, Trump's announcement did bring the focus of the campaign—at least for a few days—back to Netanyahu's favored arena: international diplomacy and his close ties to the current U.S. administration.

Indeed, **Netanyahu's campaign videos (<https://www.facebook.com/Netanyahu/videos/1203205993175390>)** late last week highlighted Trump's "Purim miracle" and "historic decision." The U.S. president, Netanyahu told viewers, was a "true friend of Israel and a personal friend of mine."

Upon his departure for Washington Saturday night, Netanyahu touted his relationships with a list of foreign leaders (Russia's Vladimir Putin, India's Narendra Modi, Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, and Japan's Shinzo Abe) but saved his most compelling pitch for Trump. "We have never had such a bond between the prime minister of Israel and an American president. This is a very, very important asset for the State of Israel, and it is important that it continue to serve us," he said, leaving no doubt as to who the voting public should see as the real selling point. As one of the Likud campaign billboards put it, Netanyahu was "a league apart" on the world stage compared to his inexperienced rivals. **The backdrop (https://twitter.com/regev_miri/status/1108993779464314880/photo/1)**, as a senior Likud minister reminded the public over the weekend, was a beaming Netanyahu and Trump shaking hands.

To be fair, none of Netanyahu's sloganeering would work if, in Verter of *Haaretz's* formulation, Israelis viewed Trump as "a harmful, childish imp" as he says the rest of the democratic world does. Yet the reality is exactly the opposite. Israel is almost alone in the world (aside from the Philippines) in adoring the U.S. president. A Pew Research Center poll last fall put **Trump's approval rating (<https://www.pewglobal.org/2018/10/01/trumps-international-ratings-remain-low-especially-among-key-allies/>)** among Israelis at 69 percent, with **82 percent (<https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/society/185410-181002-support-for-trump-higher-in-israel-than-almost-any-other-nation-poll>)** of Jewish Israelis expressing confidence in the American leader's handling of global affairs.

Israelis are single-issue voters—and that issue is Israel. In his more than two years in office, Trump has already recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital, relocating the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv; withdrawn from the Iran nuclear deal; and cut all U.S. funding to the Palestinian territories. No matter that some of these moves may not **actually serve (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/29/unrwa-israel-palestine-trump-zilber/>)** Israel's long-term security interests: The point is that after the perceived hectoring of the Obama years, Trump is viewed as an unconditional friend of the Jewish state.

Successive Israeli governments dating back to the 1990s (including two of Netanyahu's) had entertained the notion of returning the Golan Heights to Syria in exchange for a full peace. The outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, and with it the encroachment of Iranian and jihadi fighters right up to the Israeli border, shattered such ideas; the commanding heights of the Golan are now viewed once more as a **strategic necessity (<https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-israel-plays-syrias-civil-war>)**. Trump, in Israeli eyes, simply ratified what most already believe to be true: The Golan will always remain part of Israel.

"I can hardly see any Israeli prime minister who will be able to engage in peace negotiations with Syria in exchange for Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights," said Eyal Zisser, a Middle Eastern historian at Tel Aviv University, following Trump's announcement.

While some Druze residents on the Golan still remain loyal to Damascus and are therefore unhappy with the

decision, there are only 20,000 of them—unlike in the West Bank, also occupied by Israel and home to some 2.5 million Palestinians.

Given all this, Blue and White’s response to Trump’s announcement was inevitable: gratitude and co-opting, in an effort to minimize the issue. Leaving himself for Washington to make an appearance in front of the pro-Israel lobbying group the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) this week, **Gantz said** (<https://twitter.com/gantzbe/status/1108965887002869761>) it was a “wonderful opportunity to thank President Trump for recognizing Israeli sovereignty” over the territory. Along with the U.S. Embassy move, Gantz added, the Golan decision would “secure [Trump’s] place in history as a true friend of the State of Israel.”

Gantz’s running mate, Yair Lapid, went further, saying that he had started the campaign for U.S. recognition of the Golan Heights **over a year ago** (<https://twitter.com/yairlapid/status/1108809314972692481/video/1>), in the media and on Capitol Hill—which was true, although dismissed immediately by Netanyahu. Lapid in a statement also expressed thanks to Trump and called “for the rest of the world to follow the lead of the United States.”

Blue and White is putting a brave face on what is a clear attempt by the U.S. president to tilt the election in Netanyahu’s favor. Gantz yesterday politely rejected such speculation and, as one source in the party told Foreign Policy, “Any Israeli who hasn’t yet factored in [Netanyahu’s diplomatic skills] won’t have his mind changed” by the Golan decision. Moreover, the immediate media furor surrounding the Trump tweet was somewhat drowned out over the weekend by new **corruption allegations** (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-says-hes-suing-gantz-yaalon-for-libel-over-treason-claims/>) leveled at Netanyahu by Blue and White.

U.S. meddling in Israeli politics isn’t new, although this latest incident—and perhaps more moves yet to come from “Santa” Trump—may be the most blatant one yet. On the eve of the 1996 Israeli election, then-U.S. President Bill Clinton convened a regional peace summit to support the candidacy of the incumbent, Shimon Peres. The gambit didn’t work: An unknown and inexperienced upstart eked out a victory. His name was Benjamin Netanyahu.

Neri Zilber is an adjunct fellow with The Washington Institute and coauthor of the paper [State with No Army, Army with No State: Evolution of the Palestinian Authority Security Forces, 1994-2018](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/state-with-no-army-army-with-no-state) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/state-with-no-army-army-with-no-state>). ❖

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