

**09.01.2020**

## **Israel 2019: anatomy of a crime scene**

**March 2019: The United States recognizes the Golan Heights as part of Israel.**

March 25th

Donald Trump signs a presidential proclamation making the United States the first country, other than Israel, to recognize Israeli rather than Syrian sovereignty over the Golan Heights. Under international law, the Golan Heights are viewed as Syrian territory under Israeli military occupation.



The decree was signed in the presence of Benjamin Netanyahu, David Friedman (US ambassador to Israel), Jason Greenblatt (former US Middle East Peace Envoy) and Jared Kushner (Trump's son-in-law responsible for 'the Deal of the Century'). This gesture by Trump is widely interpreted as a 'gift' to Netanyahu in his bid to be re-elected.

**April 2019: Legislative elections**

Elections to the 120 member Knesset are scheduled for April 9th.

Elections had been due in November 2019, but were brought forward following a dispute among members of the government coalition. In September 2018 Israel's Supreme Court gave parliament a year to pass a new conscription bill after declaring parts of the existing exemption unconstitutional. Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman (leader of Yisrael Beiteinu) opposes a draft law supported by the ultra-Orthodox parties which would allow full-time Torah students exemptions from serving in the IDF.

Benjamin Netanyahu is entangled in four political scandals: Case 1000 which involves allegations that the PM and his wife accepted illegal gifts from businessmen; Case 2000 which accuses Netanyahu of attempting to buy favourable newspaper coverage; Case 3000, also known as the 'submarine scandal'; and Case 4000, in which a close associate of Netanyahu is suspected of providing confidential information to Israel's largest telecoms company.

The elections are being contested primarily between Netanyahu's Likud and Kahol Lavan (the Blue and White Alliance) led by former chief of general staff of the Israeli army, Benny Gantz. Gantz orchestrated *Operation Protective Edge*, the 2014 war on the besieged Gaza Strip. Despite the heavy death toll, he has shown no remorse. Instead, in an election campaign video clip in January 2019, he boasted about sending 'parts of Gaza back to the Stone Age'.

April 9th

After the elections Netanyahu's Likud are tied with Gantz's Blue and White party, both winning 35 seats. The balance of power is held by smaller parties. The right-wing and religious parties that had previously sat in coalition with Likud hold 30 seats. This should have allowed Netanyahu to form the next government. However, continuing disagreement between Netanyahu and Avigdor Lieberman over the national service of the ultra-Orthodox are a major stumbling block.



### **May 2019: the Knesset is dissolved**

May 29th

After a month of negotiations Netanyahu fails to form a government, the first time this has happened in Israel's history.

The Knesset votes 74 to 45 in favour of dispersing, the first time the Knesset has voted to dissolve itself before a government has been formed. New elections are scheduled for 17th September 2019.

### **July 2019: Preparations for military assaults on Gaza**

July 31st

It is revealed that the Israeli army has revamped combat procedures for the Gaza Strip, updating battle orders so that in a possible war Hamas and its forces would be delivered a severe blow that would weaken the organization, but not topple it.

## August 2019: Plans for annexation of the West Bank

August 11th

Benjamin Netanyahu seeks a public declaration from President Trump in support of Israel's annexation of 'Area C' of the occupied West Bank, where the majority of its illegal settlements are located. Netanyahu is pushing for Trump to issue such a declaration before Israel's general election on September 17th, hoping this will secure victory for Likud and therefore his re-election as prime minister.

Over the previous months Netanyahu has increased settlement construction and has promised that, if he wins the next election, he will annex all Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

August 15th

Trump calls on Netanyahu to bar the Democratic Representatives Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar from entering Israel. Netanyahu agrees to his demand, using a law that allows Israel to ban supporters of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement. (Tlaib later received permission to visit her grandmother in the West Bank, on the condition that she not express her support for BDS, but declined the offer.) Trump went on to say to American Jews, 'If you vote for a Democrat, you are very, very disloyal to Israel and to the Jewish people.'

## September 2019: Legislative elections (2)

September 10th

Benjamin Netanyahu announces publicly that he will annex large swathes of the occupied Palestinian territories if he is re-elected. 'I am waiting to do this in maximum coordination with [Donald] Trump,' he says in a speech broadcast live on Israeli television.

Netanyahu stands in front of a large map on an easel that shows Israeli sovereignty extended over the vast majority of the Jordan Valley. It appears to display Israeli territory completely encircling the West Bank, slicing off the eastern border with Jordan. Jericho, a Palestinian city, and smaller Palestinian villages are displayed as enclaves that would not be annexed.



‘Today, I announce my intention, after the establishment of a new government, to apply Israeli sovereignty to the Jordan Valley and the northern Dead Sea. This map defines our eastern frontier. We haven’t had this kind of opportunity since the [1967] six-day war, and may not have it again for another 50 years.’

Benny Gantz says Netanyahu has stolen his idea. ‘Blue and White have made clear that the Jordan Valley is a part of Israel forever. We are happy that Netanyahu has come around to adopt the Blue and White plan to recognise the Jordan Valley,’ he says.

September 17th

Rerun elections lead to further stalemate, with Likud winning 31 seats and the Blue and White Alliance winning 33. The Joint List, an alliance of the main Arab-majority political parties in Israel, under the leadership of Ayman Odeh, wins 13 seats. [The Israel Pirate Party won 0.03% of the votes].

Fearing defeat, the prime minister has called for his opponent to join him in a unity government, hinting that he might be willing to accept a power-sharing arrangement with Gantz. There is a precedent in Israel for political rivals to serve together; Yitzhak Shamir and Shimon Peres rotated the role of prime minister in the mid-1980s. However, Gantz swiftly rejects Netanyahu’s offer and says he should play the leading role because his alliance won the most seats. ‘We will not be dictated to,’ he warns.

Blue and White was created to oust Netanyahu on the basis that he is corrupt and actively destroying what is left of Israel’s democratic institutions, including by trying to vilify state prosecutors investigating him. Nevertheless, Blue and White is a deeply Arab-phobic party, just like Likud and Yisrael Beiteinu. 90 per cent of Israel’s Jewish population voted for parties that identify as being either on the militaristic, anti-Arab right or on the religious, anti-Arab far-right. The two parties claiming to represent the centre-left – the rebranded versions of Labour and Meretz – won only 11 seats in the 120-member parliament.

At the centre of the stalemate, and the man with the key to ending it, is Israel’s apparent kingmaker – the far right ultra-nationalist Avigdor Lieberman. The staunch secularist took eight seats, but his refusal to join a government with Jewish religious groups has helped to create the impasse.



Politicians from an alliance of the country’s minority Arab population (the Joint List) could play a role in forming a government, after becoming the third-largest bloc in the Knesset with 13 seats. Ayman Odeh, the head of the group, saw the Palestinian minority’s turn-out in September leap by 10 percentage points compared to April’s election, so desperate were his voters to see the back of Netanyahu.

Odeh has said that he may back Gantz, but even that would not give the opposition figure a majority.

September 21st

The 13 MKs from the Joint List meet together. 10 of them - with three Balad MKs dissenting - express their readiness to nominate Gantz if he meets 'basic demands' on the peace process, the Arab community's interests, and the Jewish nation-state law.

September 22nd

The Joint List leader, Ayman Odeh, declares that the Joint List has agreed, by internal majority voting, to endorse Benny Gantz for prime minister, marking the first time an Arab-Israeli party had endorsed a Zionist for prime minister. Odeh justifies his support for Gantz by saying that it was intended to send 'a clear message that the only future for this country is a shared future, and there is no shared future without the full and equal participation of Arab Palestinian citizens'.

September 23rd

Initial reports suggest that the Joint List's recommendation gives Gantz a 57 to 55 edge over Netanyahu. However, Israeli President, Reuven Rivlin, reveals that the three Balad MKs - elected as part of the Joint List - have demanded that their names be removed from a list of nominees of Gantz.

After a day of confusion, Tibi and Odeh - leaders of the two pro-Gantz parties within the Joint List - write a letter to Reuven Rivlin clarifying that the Joint List does not, in fact, have a unity agreement that legally binds individual parties to follow the party's nomination for the prime minister. As such, Balad's three MKs are legally allowed to ignore the Joint List's recommendation. As a result, Netanyahu leads Gantz in tallied recommendations by a 55 to 54 margin, with eight delegates from Yisrael Beiteinu and three delegates from Balad yet to recommend either.

September 25th

Rivlin selects Netanyahu to attempt to form the thirty-fifth government of Israel, but with the stipulation that if the attempt fails, Rivlin retains the mandate to nominate another candidate.

### **October 2019: Netanyahu fails to form a government**

October 3rd

The new members of the Knesset are sworn in. It is announced that Netanyahu is aiming to demonstrate Likud party unity by holding a leadership contest. The Israeli Prime Minister has received a challenge from Gideon Sa'ar, who tersely tweeted, 'I'm ready'. Formerly a Likud interior and education minister and a staunch nationalist, Sa'ar is seen as even more hardline regarding Israel's continuing control of the Palestinian territories, but within Israel's domestic politics he is considered pragmatic.





October 4th

Netanyahu decides against holding a leadership election.

October 10th

Mossad chief Yossi Cohen says a potential Israeli assassination of Iranian general Qassem Soleimani, the head of the elite Quds Force in Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, is 'not impossible'.

'He knows very well that his assassination is not impossible. His actions are identified and felt everywhere... there's no doubt the infrastructure he built presents a serious challenge for Israel.'

October 22nd

Netanyahu informs President Rivlin that he is unable to form a government

October 23rd

Rivlin gives the mandate of forming a government to Gantz. Gantz is given 28 days to form a coalition to lead the government.

### **November 2019: The USA declares that Israel's settlements are 'not inconsistent with international law'**

November 12th

An Israeli airstrike kills Bahaa Abu al-Atta, the commander of the Islamic Jihad resistance group. His wife Asmaa Abu al-Atta was also killed. Israeli warplanes also launched airstrikes targeting Islamic Jihad member Akram al-Ajouri in Damascus, Syria. Prime Minister Netanyahu says the targeted assassination of Abu al-Ata, which Israel refers to as a 'surgical strike', was a necessary pre-emptive measure to stop what he termed a 'ticking time bomb'.

In retaliation for al-Atta's killing, the Quds Brigades, the military wing of Islamic Jihad, launches over 190 rockets into southern and central Israel, paralyzing nearly half the country. Israeli forces carry out at least 20 airstrikes and 10 artillery shellings on several areas of the Gaza Strip, killing at least six Palestinians and wounding 30.

Israeli commentators are quick to point out that Abu al-Ata's assassination is reminiscent of that of Ahmed Jabari, the former second-in-command of Hamas's armed wing who was killed by Israel seven years ago this week. Jabari's killing was also followed by rocket attacks, which precipitated *Operation Pillar of Defence*, in which more than 100 Palestinians and two Israeli soldiers were killed.

A former Israeli official says that Netanyahu's motivation for killing a Palestinian commander in Gaza was 'partly political'. Netanyahu aims to show that his chief rival to be prime minister, Benny Gantz, cannot be counted on to provide security to the country. In the wake of the attack, a 'convoy' of Netanyahu's political allies in the Likud party have issued statements that Gantz is not trustworthy because he will depend on the Joint List of Palestinian parties in order to become prime minister.

The crisis has also highlighted tensions with Iran that may serve Netanyahu politically. Iran is in the headlines as the supporter of Palestinian resistance forces including Islamic Jihad. There is also a chance, that hostilities with Iranian proxies would 'hasten formation of an emergency national-unity government', uniting Gantz and Netanyahu. Gantz would have to drop his insistence that he would not serve with a prime minister under investigation.

November 17th

Netanyahu holds an 'emergency conference' of Likud. He tells supporters that a minority government led by Gantz and propped up from outside by the Joint List would be a 'historic national attack on Israel'. The Palestinian minority's MPs, he says, 'want to destroy the country'. Such a government, he adds, would be an outcome 'they will celebrate in Tehran, in Ramallah, and in Gaza, as they do after every terror attack.' Despite representing about 20% of Israel's population, the Joint List is described by Netanyahu and his allies as a 'terrorist-supporting fifth column' whose inclusion would jeopardise Israel's security. Doing a deal with them would amount to 'treason'.

November 18th

The Trump administration makes a bombshell announcement that it no longer considers Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank illegal under international law.



Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo says, 'After carefully studying all sides of the legal debate ... the establishment of Israeli civilian settlements in the West Bank is not, per se, inconsistent with international law.' Pompeo cites President Ronald Reagan's 1981 assessment that the settlements were not 'inherently illegal'.

November 19th

Gantz ran his election campaign on the promise to topple Netanyahu, making it difficult for the opposition leader to accept a power-sharing deal without losing credibility. Netanyahu, who is waiting to hear whether he will be indicted for three corruption cases, wants to remain in high office while battling the charges.

Gantz announces that talks with Likud have stalled. 'We have come to understand that we are speaking to a wall,' he says. 'A third round of elections would be bad, but one cannot abandon fundamental principles and values.'

The Israeli president, Reuven Rivlin, who is tasked with overseeing the government formation, strongly rebukes Netanyahu. 'The characterisation of all Arab elected officials as a *threat* to the existence of the State of Israel and as a *fifth column* must be emphatically denounced,' he says after meeting members of the prime minister's Likud party.

November 20th

The country's apparent kingmaker, Avigdor Lieberman rules out joining Gantz's government, making it appear more likely Gantz will fail. Lieberman tells a news conference that 'both (Netanyahu and Gantz) were guilty' of failing to form a unity government, which was Lieberman's preferred choice.

Benny Gantz had until midnight on the 20th to form a government. Four hours before the deadline he informs President Reuven Rivlin that he has failed, increasing the likelihood of the country holding an unprecedented third round of elections.

Israel's military announces that its jets have bombed dozens of Syrian and Iranian targets overnight in neighbouring Syria; targets include surface-to-air missiles, weapons warehouses and army bases. Several large explosions were heard in Damascus. Syrian state media says two civilians were killed in the attacks. The Israel Defence Forces say the widespread strikes were in response to four rockets fired from Syria towards Israel, all of which were intercepted by its air defences. It said it would 'continue operating firmly and resolutely against the Iranian entrenchment in Syria'.

Netanyahu agrees that a bill stipulating annexation of the Jordan Valley should be passed to the Knesset for approval. The bill was proposed earlier in November by MK Sharren Haskel from the Likud. In a tweet, Haskel conforms that the recent US announcement on settlements was 'an opportunity to promote my law for sovereignty in the [Jordan] Valley.'

November 21st

Netanyahu is officially indicted on charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust, making him the first sitting prime minister to face prosecution.

The three cases against Netanyahu can be summarized as follows: Case 1000 involves accusations that Netanyahu received gifts and benefits from billionaire benefactors including Israeli-born Hollywood producer Arnon Milchan in exchange for favours; Case 2000 involves accusations that Netanyahu agreed with Yedioth Ahronoth newspaper publisher Arnon Mozes to weaken a rival daily in return for more favorable coverage from Yedioth; and Case 4000, widely seen as the most serious, involves accusations that Netanyahu advanced regulatory decisions that benefited Shaul Elovitch, the controlling shareholder in the Bezeq telecom giant, to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars, in exchange for positive coverage from its Walla news site.

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/full-text-the-criminal-allegations-against-netanyahu-as-set-out-by-israels-ag/>

November 23rd

Netanyahu concedes that he will set up a party leadership contest within weeks.

November 24th

Gideon Sa'ar requests the Likud Central Committee to schedule a party leadership contest and announces his challenge to Netanyahu. Calling for a 'renaissance' of the Israeli right, Sa'ar criticises Netanyahu's inability to form a government. 'He (Netanyahu) has failed twice, but it is not because of the Likud's ideas. If we do not make a change, we are getting close to a left-wing government,' he warns supporters, who chant back, 'Only Sa'ar can!'

November 25th

Avigdor Lieberman rejects the idea of forming a House Committee in the Knesset to discuss providing immunity from prosecution to Netanyahu. This comes just one day after he said that he would support Netanyahu's efforts to form the committee.

'The prime minister said he doesn't need immunity,' Lieberman says, arguing that a court decision would be 'the only thing that would be accepted by all citizens.'



November 26th

Netanyahu denounces his indictment as a an 'attempted coup'. He calls for mass protests in Tel Aviv by his supporters under the banner 'Stop the coup'.

According to a poll commissioned by Channel 12, the Blue and White party has opened up a significant lead over Likud. Blue and White would top a new election with 37 Knesset seats, four more than it won in September's election. Likud would only win 30 seats, down two from its showing in September. The seven-seat lead is the largest such gap of any poll since the last elections.

## **December 2019: The International Criminal Court announces investigation into Israeli war crimes**

December 2nd

Netanyahu says that he has discussed the possibility of annexing the Jordan Valley with Trump and that Washington was not against the step.

'We talked about Iran, but we also talked at length about historic opportunities that stand before us in the coming months - among them are [establishing] the Jordan Valley as the recognized eastern border of the State of Israel, as well as a defense treaty with the United States. Things we could only dream of, but now we have the opportunity to realize them.'

'That's why I've made Benny Gantz an offer - let's realize these historic opportunities in a unity government that we establish right now in the format I've suggested. I've gone very far [in political concessions] toward this goal, because we must realize these opportunities.'

December 3rd

Details are leaked of a purported deal between Likud and Blue and White for a unity government. Both parties 'agreed in principle' to a premiership rotation deal between Benny Gantz and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu 'in which Netanyahu would go first but serve for only a few months before taking a leave of absence' to deal with his corruption charges.

The report also suggests that Likud and Blue and White have agreed that Israel would formally annex the Jordan Valley region of the occupied West Bank under the new government.

December 5th

Netanyahu says that Israel has the 'full right' to annex the Jordan Valley if it chooses to, even as the chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court warns the country against taking such a step.

Netanyahu says his proposal to annex the strategic part of the occupied West Bank was discussed during a late-night meeting with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. He says they also agreed to move forward with plans for a joint defence treaty.

December 9th

Netanyahu says that Likud will hold primaries for the party leadership if a new election is called, answering the call of activists and potential challengers who had urged him to hold a vote.

December 11th

Israel is set to hold the third round of elections in 12 months. After a deadline to form a government passes with no politician able to bring together the disparate parties, the Knesset again votes to dissolve itself. New elections will be held on 2 March 2020.

Netanyahu did not attend the vote. In a video on social media, he accuses Gantz of conspiring with Arab leaders and 'forcing' new elections. 'In order to prevent this happening again, there is only one thing we must do: win and win big.'

Netanyahu and Likud Central Committee Chairman, MK Haim Katz, agree to hold a primary for the party leadership on December 26th.

December 20th

Following four years of preliminary investigations, the International Criminal Court's chief prosecutor, Fatou Bensouda, announces her intention to open a full investigation into possible war crimes in the Palestinian territories as soon as the court's jurisdiction has been established.



Netanyahu responds that the International Criminal Court (ICC) has no jurisdiction in the case. 'The ICC only has jurisdiction over petitions submitted by sovereign states. But there has never been a Palestinian state.'

U.S. Secretary of State. Mike Pompeo, says that the United States does not believe Palestinians qualify as a sovereign state. 'We firmly oppose this and any other action that seeks to target Israel unfairly.'

December 22nd

Representatives from the Israeli ministries of foreign affairs, justice and the national security council meet In Netanyahu's office to discuss practical ways to respond to the ICC chief prosecutor's decision. Israel announces that it is considering preventing the entry of officials from the ICC.

December 23rd

Netanyahu tweets: 'The decision by the International Criminal Court to probe Israel constitutes pure antisemitism. The ICC believes Jews do not have a right to settle in our historic Jewish homeland or to defend ourselves against enemies seeking our annihilation.'

December 24th

A meeting of Israeli ministers to discuss the plans for annexing the Jordan Valley, due to be held the following week, is cancelled because of concerns that it could intensify confrontation with the ICC.

December 25th

Netanyahu is forced to leave the stage and take shelter during a campaign rally in Ashkelon after a rocket was launched from the Gaza strip. The rocket was shot down by the Iron Dome air defence interceptor. In September a Netanyahu rally in nearby Ashdod was interrupted by a rocket siren.

The Israeli military announces that it has deployed fighter jets and helicopters to bomb several Hamas targets in Gaza in response to the strike. 'The IDF holds the Hamas terror organization responsible for events transpiring in the Gaza Strip and emanating from it. Hamas will bear the consequences for actions against Israeli civilians.'

Gantz releases a statement criticising Netanyahu for his failure to stem attacks from Gaza. 'The situation in which Israeli citizens live at the mercy of terrorists and the prime minister of Israel is unable to tour parts of his country is a badge of shame on the security policy in the south – and a loss of deterrence that no sovereign country can accept.'

December 26th

Netanyahu wins 'a landslide victory' in a primary election for leadership of the ruling Likud party. He beats opponent, Gideon Sa'ar by 41,492 votes (72.5%) to 15,885 (27.5%). Roaring winds, heavy rain and the Jewish festival of Hanukkah, when children are out of school, are blamed for a lower than expected turnout. Just under 50% of eligible voters cast ballots.

December 27th

Netanyahu announces a six-point plan aimed at securing US recognition of Israel's annexation of most of the West Bank and rolling back Iran's influence in the region.

'First, we will finalize our borders; second, we will push the US to recognize our sovereignty in the Jordan Valley and the northern Dead Sea; third, we will push for US recognition of our extension of sovereignty over all the communities in Judea and Samaria, all of them without exception; fourth, we will push for a historic defence alliance with the US that will preserve Israeli freedom of action; fifth, stop Iran and its allies decisively; and sixth, push for normalization and agreements that will lead to peace accords with Arab countries.'

December 30th

Israel's Supreme Court convenes to hear a petition on whether an indicted member of parliament can form a new government, a key test case for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to see if he can prolong his political career after elections in March. If the court decides Netanyahu is ineligible, it could precipitate a constitutional crisis in Israel, and exacerbate the already tenuous ties between the Israeli government and the judiciary. Israeli law requires Cabinet ministers and mayors to resign if indicted but does not specify the same for a sitting prime minister!

## **January 2020: Netanyahu pleads for immunity from prosecution**

January 1st

Netanyahu announces that he intends to ask parliament to grant him immunity from corruption charges, a step that is expected to delay his trial until after elections in March, when he hopes to win a majority coalition that would shield him from prosecution.

'In order to continue to lead Israel to great achievements, I intend to approach the speaker of the Knesset in accordance with chapter 4C of the law, in order to fulfil my right, my duty and my mission to continue to serve you for the future of Israel.'

The parliament Speaker, Yuli Edelstein, a member of Netanyahu's Likud party, says he will hold talks on the matter next week. Normally, a request for immunity would need to be approved by the parliament's House Committee and then be submitted to a full vote. But the House Committee does not exist because a

government was never formed after September's election. Court proceedings cannot begin until the question of immunity is settled.

January 3rd

Early in the morning, Iranian military leader, Qasim Suleimani, is assassinated by an American drone near Baghdad airport.

January 6th

While chairing a Security Cabinet meeting, Netanyahu says that Israel should not be dragged into the conflict between the US and Iran. He says that the killing of top Iranian General Qassem Soleimani was carried out by the US, stressing that Israel was 'not involved'.