

Israeli PM: 'I'm Stronger Than Ever'

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IH: Back to your comments about a “good commander” and a “bad commander.” The leader is at the midst of it all, and at the end of the day, you make the decisions on your own.

BN: “First and foremost, you decide what to bring before the cabinet, and usually, whatever the cabinet decides is what the prime minister decides. I am well aware of the serious responsibility I shoulder. Power and influence are meaningless without responsibility, because that translates into grave danger.

“You alone are responsible. I can’t look around and tell someone, ‘You take care of it’; or vote one way and trust that there would be a majority [vote] that would address ‘something else,’ because at the end of the day, I’m the one who has to decide what that ‘something else’ is. There is no room, no leeway, for adventurism.”

IH: Are such moments clouded by a great feeling of loneliness?

BN: “Could it be any different?”

IH: As for your two main challengers (in the next election), Yesh Atid Chairman Yair Lapid and Habayit Hayehudi Chairman Naftali Bennett, how much have you been able to learn, if at all, about the fact that they are not ready to vie for the premiership, and about the importance of experience at wartime?

BN: “I don’t give out grades.”

IH: Your opponents, the faction leaders, say that your position has been “eroded,” and some in the Likud say that

“leadership cannot grow in your shadow,” which is why some have chosen to leave the party.

BN: “So that’s what they say. I can tell you that the public is saying otherwise, as is the impression among Likud members. Party members are very enthused, very supportive. And you know what? Today, after Operation Protective Edge, I have the support and appreciation of those who didn’t vote for me. That’s the truth I have encountered.

“I compare the support today to that of a year ago, be it from the public or within the Likud, and I’m stronger than ever both within my party and among the general public.”

IH: Does this mean you will be seeking another term in office?

BN: “Yes, absolutely.”

IH: Why didn’t you to ask Gideon Sa’ar to remain in the Likud?

BN: “I respect Gideon’s track record as well as his decision. I was the one who brought him on as cabinet secretary during my first term in office, and later on, when we were in the opposition, I was the one who appointed him to head our political work. He did an excellent job.

“Later on I asked him to become education minister and execute a reform comprised of two elements, the core value of Israel’s heritage and the introduction of achievement-measuring tools. After all, we want to anchor our children’s future and provide them with the ability to compete in the world of science, computers, language and mathematics. The same goes for the reforms in the construction industry and the effort to remove infiltrators from Israel. We worked on those issues together and successfully so.

“I have expressed my appreciation for his work, and I wished him the best of luck after he made his decision—I didn’t dwell on the considerations that led him to make it. And no, not

everything in politics is personal. If everything was personal I might not have made some of the decision I made.”

IH: The state budget has created tension between the parties. What direction is the budget heading in? On the one hand, we have been hearing social statements, and on the other hand, we need to reinforce Israel's security.

BN: “These are two elements that need to be combined in the correct proportions. We need to increase the defense budget and we need to exercise economic responsibility. I think we have come a certain part of the way, but we have yet to complete it. We have some time—not a lot of time, but some. At the end of the day, the differences are about money.”

IH: The defense establishment asked for an additional 11 billion shekels [\$3 billion], and it looks like it will get about half of it. Where do you stand on the issue?

BN: “The defense establishment can ask for NIS 40 billion [\$11 billion]. Security needs are like health needs in that sense—endless, and rightfully so, because the scope of the threats we face mandates a substantial defense budget. Nevertheless there are limitations as to how far the budgets and how far the Israeli economy can stretch.

“You need a robust economy to fund defense and security and you need security to safeguard the economy. The former is clear to everyone, because if you don't have a robust economy you can't fund security. But without security—you have no economy.”

The need to decide between Israel's security needs and its economic needs, the prime minister said, “applies to every topic. For example, a year and a half ago, after Operation Pillar of Defense, I made the significant decision to acquire a great deal of Iron Dome interceptor missiles. This decision cost money, but it made a crucial contribution to security.”

IH: That is true, but it created a situation where the discourse focused solely on defense and security.

BN: “If the discourse was focused solely on security, we wouldn’t be debating between these needs. I was delighted when the international credit ratings agency S&P affirmed Israel’s A+ rating, which we earned three years ago as a result of our responsible fiscal policies.

“I think it is clear that Israel’s economy is solid and that it’s properly managed, especially after the major reforms I led between 2003 and 2005. We exercise responsible practices. It’s important for the economy, but it’s also important for health, welfare, education and of course, security.

“It’s important to remember that our defense needs have grown not because reality is about to change, but because it already has,” Netanyahu continued. “There are multiple theaters, and the weapons are changing. Terrorist organizations are hiding among civilian population, and this requires defenses the likes of Iron Dome, alongside offensive weapons and sophisticated use of intelligence. All of this is very expensive.

“The reality of the Middle East increases Israel’s defense expenditures. Our current deployments are more expensive than dealing with conventional armies.”

IH: Could it be that here, in the new situation that has emerged, the conflict with the U.S. has turned from legitimate disagreements into a crack in the relationship?

BN: “No,” Netanyahu said. “I think the relationship between Israel and the United States is based on solid foundations, and at the end of the day, large parts of the American public feel a deep affiliation with Israel. The difference is like night and day compared to the situation in Western Europe. That stems from historical, political, cultural and many other reasons.

"There is a deep bond between Israel and the U.S., and every administration subscribes to that. It is a deep connection. Only recently the Senate passed a resolution declaring Israel a major strategic partner, and Congress appropriated \$235 million of [defense] aid. These are the markings of a very deep bond."

IH: Historically speaking, the Kingdom of Israel was relatively short-lived. Israel's enemies have compared Israel to the crusaders, who were eventually banished. What can we do differently this time?

BN: "Herzl was once asked—if a Jewish state were to be established, how long would it survive? His answer was, it will survive for as long as Western culture, the culture of freedom, survives."

"Simultaneously, we must also strive to forge new alliances. Every country needs allies. Even the largest powers need allies, let alone a country like Israel. Close and distant allies alike. We are developing new allies. We want to preserve our traditional alliance with the U.S., which is also evolving and where we need to approach new sectors. For this reason I have been visiting not just the U.S. but also China, Japan and other places. We are active in the global arena, and we've dispatched envoys to Africa, Russia and Eastern Europe."

"You have to remember, no one will strike an alliance with you if you're weak, which is why we have to cultivate our power," Netanyahu said. "At the end of the day, we have to be able to defend ourselves by ourselves against direct threats. These insights regarding spatial perspective, and the ability to create coalitions for common goals and interests, are the essence of policy: creating momentum."

"Simultaneously, we have to cultivate our ability to defend ourselves, and that's my responsibility. That's my true vision—not a vision of 'let's jump off a cliff, call it taking

initiative, and fall into an abyss,' as was the case with anyone who has ever made such suggestions based on a complete disconnect from reality."

IH: What does your plan for a regional horizon entail?

BN: "We're talking about cementing and advancing Israel's power. The changes leading Arab nations have undergone have led them to view Israel not as their traditional enemy, but as a partner against three radical Islamist threats: the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, al-Qaida and its offshoots, the likes of Islamic State and the Nusra Front, and the radical Shiites, who are sponsored by Iran and its proxy, Hezbollah.

"Can this realization translate into a more open relationship that further promotes a responsible, sober and safe diplomatic process? Only time will tell. It's worth exploring."

IH: What you are essentially saying is that a new trio has been formed, Saudi Arabia-Egypt-Israel?

BN: "That's taking things a bit far; but a word to the wise: You saw exactly how various nations reacted when we mounted a forceful response against Hamas and Islamic Jihad."

IH: To conclude, what would you like to say to the Israeli public?

BN: "We have weathered a challenging year, which included two elements that also characterized Zionism in its early days, 100 years ago: to keep building our country and defend our people. That's what we've been doing for the past year, paving highways and laying train tracks, roads to Jerusalem, the north and the south, connecting the Galilee and the Negev to central Israel; and there's an unprecedented construction boom.

"We've been able to stop the infiltrators' phenomenon from Sinai—rivers of illegal migrants were about to flood the

county—that problem has been solved, and we are removing those who have entered Israel illegally. This year alone 6,000 infiltrators were removed. This problem, which preoccupied all of us just a year ago, no longer resonates as loudly.

“We have also developed our economy and withstood regional upheavals the likes of which this region has not seen since the fall of the Ottoman Empire,” Netanyahu said.

“I was glad to see the resilience, strength and bravery our people have demonstrated. Our younger generation, IDF soldiers, they have proven themselves as a wonderful generation, a heroic generation. Some have doubted us, dismissing Israeli society as a ‘spider’s web’ [Netanyahu was referring to Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah]. Well, that’s some spider’s web,” Netanyahu said, paraphrasing Winston Churchill.

“I wish all of us a happy new year. A safe year. I will do everything in my power to make it a quiet year as well.”