

Netanyahu: Israel 'Doing Better' Despite Harsh Realities

Shortly before taking the time to give *Israel Hayom* a special holiday interview recently, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu looked over a speech he was scheduled to give at the Menachem Begin Heritage Center.

In his office, next to photos of his wife and family, the prime minister keeps a portrait of Theodor Herzl. "He was a prophet. A modern prophet," Netanyahu said, further naming Zionist leader Ze'ev Jabotinsky, Israel's first Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion and revered Likud leader and former Prime Minister Menachem Begin, as equally important Zionist leaders.

"Begin had comprehensive vision of both the past and the future. He was aware of the dangers of tyrannical regimes and dictatorships, and wary of dictatorships with aspirations for global domination and their desire to eliminate anyone who stands in their way," Netanyahu planned to say in his speech, thus quoting Jabotinsky, the Right's legendary leader.

In a special Rosh Hashana interview with *Israel Hayom*, Netanyahu relates to this sentiment, and borrows on the great leaders' experience. "The main quality a statesman should possess is foresight and subsequently the ability to properly navigate an ever-changing reality," he said.

And so, as the year in which Israel has weathered and won a war, at the price of bereavement, come to an end, the prime minister shares his perspective and strategy, and analyzes the changing realities in the Middle East.

IH: Mr. Prime Minister, the new year has begun. Is Israel doing better or worse than it did on the eve of Rosh Hashana

last year?

BN: “We are doing better while facing a harsher reality. The reality around us is that radical Islam is marching forward on all fronts. This reality poses a challenge for us, as well as for the rest of the world. One of my duties as prime minister is making sure the world understands that our war against these Islamic organizations and states, as well as against the Islamic Republic of Iran, is their war as well.

“We are actually doing better now because on one of those fronts Hamas has received a debilitating blow, the likes of which it hasn’t received since it seized control of the Gaza Strip,” Netanyahu said. “We targeted each of Hamas’ capabilities and we set it back years—its rocket stockpiles, by killing 1,000 terrorists, destroying terror tunnels, demolishing terror towers, and crippling infrastructures Hamas spent years building.

“I believe we achieved the operation’s objective, meaning achieving lasting peace and quiet by re-establishing deterrence via dealing [Hamas] a massive blow. What happens if they try again? They will be dealt a doubly debilitating blow—and they know it.”

An indication to that effect, Netanyahu said, “was when one rocket was fired [after a truce was called] and they acted swiftly, before we even had a chance to execute our response. We were set to mount a forceful response over that one lone rocket, but [Hamas] rushed to explain that they were against rocket fire, saying the perpetrators were arrested and that they had no knowledge of their plans, and adding that they were ensuring order would be enforced.

“The message was received, but the keeper of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps. We are ready for action at any time. The difference is that now, the balance [of power] has changed.”

IH: Why didn’t we vanquish Hamas?

BN: “The answer to that question is very complex and it entails a variety of considerations. One of those considerations is a spatial consideration, which cannot be ignored. We have Hamas in the south, al-Qaida and the Nusra Front in the Golan Heights, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Islamic State in the east; and above all we have Iran, which has not abandoned neither its support of some of these terrorist groups, nor its plans to acquire nuclear weapons.

“I have decided that the best way to tackle these problems is to seriously undermine Hamas in Gaza, but refrain from getting dragged in there,” Netanyahu explained. “Otherwise, we would have found ourselves fighting not a 50-day war, but a 500-day one, and the heavy toll would have included more than human lives, but other areas as well. We would have had to face the question of what to do with the seized territory; there would have been an international price to pay – and all of that wouldn’t have yielded a much better result.

“I think the difference between a good commander and a bad commander, is that a good commander knows how to achieve the declared goals for a lesser price. We would have ended up with the same result, only with a much heavier price, and I don’t want to elaborate further.”

IH: Surely, Mr. Prime Minister, you are aware of the fact that at least some of the public does not see it that way. There is a sense of disappointment.

“That’s because the public isn’t privy to the overall considerations. Some of the public would have preferred we act hastily, but I get the impression that it’s only a small percentage,” Netanyahu said.

Beachfront Survey

The prime minister told us about a “casual survey” he has had the chance to conduct twice recently, while taking a walk on the beach.

“The majority of the public, according to my brief and casual survey – we’re talking about people who were at the beach, people from all over Israel, who were not invited there or screened, and with whom I spoke directly – mostly what I heard from them were praises about the responsible manner in which we are leading the country and statements of appreciation.

“No one thinks Israel was soft [on Hamas]. No one in their right mind thinks that. Statements to that effect may have been made in the beginning, but as the campaign unfolded and people saw the force of the blow dealt to the terror organizations, they understood it was a very serious blow.

“What we did to Hamas, which is twice as strong as Islamic State, Israel did that by itself—not as part of a 38-nation coalition. Israel used tremendous firepower. Naturally, we never sought to put any civilian in harm’s way. We targeted only terrorists.”

IH: How influential were the military and the chief of staff in preventing a wider ground operation?

BN: “Nothing was prevented. We used combined judgment—mine, the defense minister’s and the chief of staff’s, and eventually that of the cabinet members. I won’t comment on cabinet meetings, but I can say that within the cabinet there was, most of the time and when it came time to decide, unanimity about the nature of operations.”

Operation Protective Edge, Netanyahu said, “was executed according to an outline and objectives I had set. The first order of business was targeting the terror tunnels in the

south. That was a massive aerial strike. Then came preparing international public opinion, via conversations I had with prominent leaders: [U.S. President Barack] Obama, [Russian President Vladimir] Putin, [German Chancellor Angela] Merkel, [French President Francois] Hollande, [British Premier David] Cameron, [Canadian Prime Minister Stephen] Harper, and others.

“I made it clear to them that unless a cease-fire was struck we would have to launch a ground operation against the tunnels—something that was not acceptable at the time. I also made it clear to them that if a cease-fire was declared, the first thing we would discuss would be neutralizing the tunnels; and that if the other side didn’t accept a cease-fire, or if it falters—and I had serious reservations, to say the least, about both options—then I had decided we would launch an operation to neutralize the tunnels.

“When we had completed uncovering the tunnels, I made the decision to pull the military out of [enemy] fire range, because I thought it was pointless to leave the soldiers there, and that the right thing to do was to resume the aerial strikes. The thing that guided me, and proved right, was that at the end of the day, the [aerial] campaign would trump [Hamas’s] attrition, because our firepower is greater than theirs. That’s also what happened—they agreed to our demand for a cease-fire.”

IH: With the negotiations resuming in Cairo, both Israel and Hamas have their demands. What is your red line?

BN: “First of all, these talks are about security issues and it’s not a diplomatic negotiation,” Netanyahu explained. “I made sure that the [Israeli] delegation was comprised purely of defense officials, and I didn’t task my diplomatic envoy attorney Isaac Molcho or any of the ministers to join it.

“The goal is to make it clear that we are focused solely on two issues: ensuring our security interests, as well as the

ability to send humanitarian aid and supplies that would assist in rebuilding the ruins, in favor of Gaza's population. Naturally, we have demands of our own, and we have the necessary tenacity to reject any demands the other side might make that we find unacceptable. We have been doing so successfully."

Q: Is the demilitarization of the Gaza Strip one of the objectives?

BN: "Of course. It remains an objective. Will this objective be agreed upon and achieved soon? I find that hard to believe. But I'm versed in introducing ideas and objectives that gradually permeate into the international arena. For example, at the time I spoke about overcoming airplane hijackings by targeting terror states rather than the terror groups; or when I introduced the concept of imposing sanctions on Iran. There are other examples: when I spoke about free Israeli economy, and even in the internal discourse I led about dealing with Hamas' terror tunnels.

"I have always encountered criticism and skepticism, but at the end of the day, these ideas filter through," Netanyahu continued. "I believe in them because it is part of our struggle. This is more than a military and economic struggle, this is a diplomatic struggle and one for public opinion, and it's going to be a long struggle.

"This is how I expect it to be in my coming visit to the U.N. General Assembly. I intend to speak about the threats posed by radical Islam. Naturally, the biggest threat is that such states and organizations would obtain nuclear weapons."

IH: Continuing with this theme, would a collaboration between the U.S. and Iran in the fight against Islamic State be innately wrong?

BN: "Iran will fight Islamic State regardless, as will [Syrian President Bashar] Assad and Hezbollah. Now, imagine that Assad

says, 'Give me my chemical weapons back and I'll fight Islamic State.' That's absurd. It makes no sense, there's no justification for it, and there's no need to collaborate with Iran on Islamic State. They will fight it as they see fit.

"Iran doesn't oppose Islamic State's notion of a caliphate," Netanyahu explained. "The latter wants a caliphate and the former wants the rule of the Mahdi [the prophesied redeemer of Islam]. There is no big difference, just minor theological distinctions. Both, as well as all other radical Islamist leaders, aspire to take over those closest to them, and then vie for world domination.

"The danger organizations with lunatic ideologies pose lies with the fact that they might obtain weapons of mass destruction, which is why they are a threat the likes of which the world has never faced. This is the danger from which I'm trying to warn the world now, and I can already see the first signs of comprehension."

IH: It also seems as if the West is about to strike a bad deal with Iran on its nuclear program.

BN: "I'm certainly concerned by that. There are indications that [world] powers might agree to accept Iran as a nuclear-threshold state."

IH: If that is the case, what should Israel do next?

BN: "Fight it every way possible, and simultaneously explain the 'ideological' aspect: We don't necessarily have to say that [Iran and the Islamic State] are operating from the same command center, but rather that they have a common ideology. Who will be the next caliph? Who will rule a world dominated by radical Islam?

"Such a world has no room for Jews, seculars, homosexuals or minorities, and we know where they believe women belong. This is a serious threat because they are sending their tentacles

all over the world—the United States, Europe, Australia, Russia, China and Africa—this is a global threat,” Netanyahu said.

“I believe that my role as the prime minister of Israel is to make it clear that the threat we face is one the entire world faces. We understand that, but many worldwide don’t understand this threat. I appreciate these signs of comprehension and I want to cultivate them.”

IH: With your permission, let’s revisit the issue of how the war was handled. You presented an educated outline of how the operation should be handled, but there were ministers in your government who thought otherwise.

BN: “This isn’t a question of versions, this is about simple facts and processes that one day I hope would come to light in full.”

IH: You spoke of the general consensus within the cabinet, but I’m not sure that was the case where some ministers were concerned.

BN: “I said all I had to say about that during the war.”

Stay tuned to . for part two of Israel Hayom’s exclusive interview with Benjamin Netanyahu on Tuesday.

For the original article, visit .