

LETTER FROM ISRAEL

THE PRICE OF NETANYAHU'S AMBITION

Amid war with Hamas, a hostage crisis, the devastation of Gaza, and Israel's splintering identity, the Prime Minister seems unable to distinguish between his own interests and his country's.

By David Remnick

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For liberal, secular Israelis, Netanyahu has always been an object of scorn on a range of social and political issues, but now, across the ideological landscape, he stands accused of failing utterly on his promise of vigilance and security. Illustration by Andrea Ventura; Source photograph by Sean Gallup / Getty

To be vigilant—to live without illusions about the ever-present threat of annihilation—was a primary value at No. 4 Haportzim Street, once the Jerusalem address of the Netanyahu family. This wariness had ancient roots. In the Passover Haggadah, the passage beginning “Vehi Sheamda” reminds everyone at the Seder table that in each generation an enemy “rises up to destroy” the Jewish people. “But the Holy One, Blessed be He, delivers us from their hands,” the Haggadah continues. Benzion Netanyahu, the family patriarch and a historian of the Spanish Inquisition, was a secular man. For deliverance, he looked not to faith but to the renunciation of naïveté and the strength of arms. This creed became his middle son’s inheritance, the core of his self-conception as the uniquely unillusioned defender of the State of Israel.

That son, Benjamin Netanyahu, is now in his sixth term as Prime Minister. Not even the state’s founder, David Ben-Gurion, held power longer. But Netanyahu’s standing in the polls is dismal. Now seventy-four, he always campaigned on security, presenting himself as the one statesman and patriot who saw through the malign intentions of Israel’s enemies. Yet with the Hamas massacre of some twelve hundred people in southern Israel, on October 7th, he had presided over an unprecedented collapse of state security.

“Historically, Netanyahu will go down in history as the worst Jewish leader ever,” Avraham Burg, a former speaker of the Knesset who long ago left the Labor Party and joined the leftist Hadash Party, told me. The fury at Netanyahu among centrists and many conservatives is scarcely less intense.

Galit Distel Atbaryan, a hard-line minister in Netanyahu's government, resigned after October 7th; she later talked of her "burning anger" toward him. She was hesitant to attack Netanyahu during wartime, but, she told Israeli television, she herself had "sinned" for her own role in dividing Israeli society. When she woke on the morning of the seventh and heard the news of the catastrophic attack, her first thought was "You did this. You weakened the nation." Now, she said, "the days of this government are numbered—that's obvious." Naftali Bennett, a former Prime Minister, told me that Israel was experiencing a self-defeating level of division. "In the past year," he said, "Israel has been tearing itself apart and its immune system became weak. Our enemy saw that and attacked."

Since first gaining the Prime Minister's office, in 1996, Bibi, as everyone has called him since childhood, has been dismissive of any talk about the influence of his family—"psychobabble," he once described it to me with a disdainful wave of the hand. Yet the power of his father's guidance was never in doubt. When Benzion died, in 2012, at the age of a hundred and two, Netanyahu delivered a eulogy that directly addressed his father, and spoke to the centrality of his counsel: "You always told me that a necessary component for any living body—and a nation is a living body—is the ability to identify a danger in time, a quality that was lost to our people in exile; that is what you said. You taught me, Father, to look at reality head on, to understand what it holds and to come to the necessary conclusions."

Benzion was an acolyte of Ze'ev Jabotinsky, the leader of the branch of right-wing Zionism known as Revisionism (what was being revised was a Zionist agenda deemed insufficiently militant), and it had been Jabotinsky who foresaw disaster befalling the Jews of Europe, which, in 1938, he likened to a "volcano which will soon begin to spew forth its fires of destruction." In the Revisionist view, the founding of Israel came, culpably, too late—too late for six million Jews. Like Jabotinsky, Benzion believed that Ben-Gurion and other mainstream Labor Zionists had been much too accommodating of the British, who ruled Mandate-era Palestine, and too willing to negotiate with the Arabs

who lived there. “A nice end they are preparing for us,” Benzion wrote in a Revisionist publication. “That end is an Arab state in the land of Israel.” His view of the enemy did not admit much humanity. “The tendency to conflict is in the essence of the Arab,” he told a reporter in 2009. “The goal of the Arabs of Israel is destruction. They do not deny that they want to destroy us.”

Any departure from territorial maximalism was anathema to Benzion. His three sons—Yonatan, Bibi, and Iddo—could have been left in no doubt about where he stood. Ben-Gurion’s acceptance of the U.N. partition plan, in 1947, dividing the land between the Jews and the Arabs, was intolerable. Benzion condemned his fellow-Revisionist Menachem Begin when, at Camp David, in 1978, Begin negotiated the return of the Sinai to Egypt, in what became an enduring peace agreement. The Oslo Accords, signed in the nineties by Yitzhak Rabin, were also an act of pathetic credulity. It was easy to imagine Benzion’s response to Ehud Barak’s negotiations with Palestinians over sovereignty, in 2000; Ariel Sharon’s disengagement from Gaza, in 2005; and Ehud Olmert’s proposal, in 2008, to create a demilitarized Palestinian state. Apparently, Benzion was even critical of his son’s decision to share sovereignty with the Palestinians over the West Bank city of Hebron. No one was vigilant enough to escape his contempt. Benzion once remarked that his son might make a fine foreign minister. Netanyahu was the country’s Prime Minister at the time.

When I visited Israel late last month, the first thing I noticed was that the surface hustle of daily life was back. In the first few weeks after October 7th, during my previous visit, Israel was all but shut down; as hundreds of thousands of reservists left work and home to report for duty, schools and businesses closed, and the roads were empty. Now everything is open and the roads are full.

But nothing is normal. Ask someone “*Ma shlomcha?*” (“How are you?”) and you will get a long silence or a sigh, as if to say, “Are you really asking?” Then comes a wounded reply. People are quick to recount the nightmare they’d just

had or the day's gnawing anxiety. "I have dreams that Hamas is at my door." "We all know someone—or we all know someone who knows someone—who was killed or at war." And then you hear plaintive expressions of a lost sense of security: "We are no longer Israeli, we are Jewish."

In cars and kitchens, people tune in to the hourly newscasts on the radio, which invariably begin with necrology: short biographies of fallen soldiers. Then come the reports of the Army's progress in Gaza, tunnels discovered, Hamas fighters killed, cross-border violence in the northern Galilee with Hezbollah, bombing raids on Iranian-backed militias in Syria, Houthi attacks on Israeli ships in the Red Sea. The news on television carries panel discussions with generals, intelligence officers, government officials. Are Netanyahu and President Biden starting to diverge? And what the hell is happening on American campuses?

Netanyahu usually works out of a surprisingly shabby office complex in central Jerusalem, but these days he is mostly holed up in the Kirya, a defense compound in Tel Aviv, where he leads a five-member war council. Three of the other four members have little love for Netanyahu and would be happy to see him replaced: the defense minister, Yoav Gallant, whom he temporarily fired last year; Benny Gantz, a former chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces and a potential challenger, who is running ahead of Netanyahu in the polls by almost two to one; and Gadi Eisenkot, another former I.D.F. chief of staff and potential challenger, whose connection with the Israeli public deepened when his son died in the fighting in Gaza recently. Then, there's Ron Dermer, an American-born political adviser and loyalist whose father and brother were both mayors of Miami Beach.

Netanyahu and Dermer are comfortable in the folkways of American Republicanism. Dermer is sometimes known as "Netanyahu's brain" and, like his patron, believes that American Presidents (Barack Obama perhaps most of all) tend to be mistily deluded about the intentions of Palestinians, Hezbollah, and, crucially, the Iranians. Biden, like so many of his predecessors, has a tortured history with Netanyahu, whom he has sometimes found to be self-

righteous, condescending, and deceptive. Although Biden initially embraced Netanyahu after October 7th—and displayed so much empathy for Israelis that many people here were heard to say they wished *he* were their Prime Minister—Netanyahu has since shown cavalier disdain for American efforts to minimize the horrific bloodshed and destruction throughout Gaza, prevent a second front in the north, and convey support for the prospect of two states.

At the Kirya, Netanyahu daily confronts the subject of the hostages in Gaza. Somehow, the hunger to bring them home is an expression of Israel's basic purpose: to protect a people who had nearly been eradicated. Among the many accusations being levelled at Netanyahu is that he failed a test of basic humanity when he did not immediately and publicly connect with the families of the hostages. (The Prime Minister's office maintains that Netanyahu was supportive of the hostage families from the start.) His more recent attempts at empathy have proved, to many, utterly unconvincing. Recently, at a televised press conference, a reporter from *Israel Hayom* (*Israel Today*), a newspaper established in 2007 by the American casino billionaire Sheldon Adelson to support Netanyahu, asked the Prime Minister if he wore the "Bring Them Home" dog tags that are ubiquitous now in Israel. At a tense earlier meeting with former hostages and their families, Netanyahu had to explain that he had left his dog tag by his bed. One parent was having none of it: "You don't put it on your neck because you're ashamed." Now, on cue, he fished out the dog tag he was wearing and displayed it to the cameras.

What is not especially visible on Israeli television is the unrelenting horror of Palestinian suffering in Gaza, where more than twenty-three thousand people have been killed in three months, and an estimated 1.9 million have been displaced. Only rarely do Israelis see what the rest of the world sees: the corpses of Palestinian children wrapped in sheets by a mass grave; widespread hunger and disease; schools and houses, apartment blocks and mosques, reduced to rubble; people fleeing from one place to the next, on foot, on donkey carts, three to a bicycle, all the time knowing that there is no real refuge from mortal danger. Gaza is a presence on Israeli television mainly

through the dispatches of reporters embedded with the I.D.F. And they tend to emphasize the experience of Israeli soldiers—their missions, their clashes with Hamas fighters, the search for hostages, the crisp pronouncements of generals and officials helicoptering in from Jerusalem.

A disregard for the suffering in Gaza is hardly limited to reactionary ministers or far-right commentators. Ben Caspit, the author of a biography critical of Netanyahu, recently posted that he felt no compunction about concentrating on the home front. “Why should we turn our attention [to Gaza]?” he wrote. “They’ve earned that hell fairly, and I don’t have a milligram of empathy.” When I asked Caspit about this, he replied that he was “pro-humanitarian aid” and a lifelong “peacenik,” but insisted that there had been, until October 7th, a “ceasefire” with Hamas. And then, he said, they “crossed the border, came to our villages to loot, to rape, to kill, and to kidnap. So, as an Israeli, it’s difficult for me to feel sorry now during this war while we are going on burying five and seven soldiers a day.” He did not care about Gaza in “exactly the same way that the British did not care about the Germans in World War Two and the Americans about the Japanese,” he went on. “We were forced into this situation. We did not initiate it. On the contrary, we initiated peace.” His is a common sentiment among Israelis.

“You do see Gaza on TV, but not enough,” Ilana Dayan, the longtime host of “Uvda” (“Fact”), a kind of Israeli “60 Minutes,” told me one evening over coffee in Tel Aviv. Dayan, who has aired countless reports critical of the Israeli government and military, allowed that a patriotic tone has overtaken much of what appears on the air. “And when I come home and I say, ‘We have to know more,’ it’s hard for them to care. We know our audiences are impatient with any kind of deviation from the mainstream. We interview people about October 7th—we are stuck on October 7th—and, after those atrocities, we too often, understandably, lack the empathy to see what is happening on the other side of the border. As an Israeli, I felt so, too. As a reporter, I feel that we have to tell Israelis about the price being paid in Gaza.”

When Palestinian citizens of Israel, who make up twenty per cent of the

population, voice their political sentiments on social media, the result can be harassment, doxing, or even a visit from the authorities. Many are repulsed by what they are seeing on Israeli television, in the light of what has appeared on media outlets based in the Arab world. “I can’t stomach it,” Diana Buttu, a human-rights lawyer who was once a negotiator for the Palestine Liberation Organization, told me. She lives in Haifa, a mixed city on the northern coast. “Palestinians are so dehumanized. They are not people. There is no sense of what it means that twenty thousand are dead, half of them kids. It’s only ‘We have to get Hamas.’ My neighbors in Haifa don’t see or comprehend what is being done in their name.”

Palestinian citizens of Israel are required to negotiate an enormously complicated identity. They are physicians, nurses, teachers, and workers who speak Hebrew as well as Arabic and are integrated into Israeli life, and yet they also live among ghosts, villages and towns that were once Palestinian and are now Israeli. In times of crisis, Jewish Israelis often regard them with suspicion. Who are they first? Loyal Israeli citizens or Palestinian nationalists? Hassan Jabareen, the founder and director of Adalah, a human-rights organization that takes up legal cases in defense of Palestinian Israelis, also lives in Haifa, and he told me this was the first time that the Israeli police have barred antiwar demonstrations since the Oslo Accords. His community “doesn’t feel now that they have second-class citizenship,” he said. “No, now it is almost like occupation *within* Israel. We are treated as enemies.”

One statistic that disturbs many Jewish Israelis appeared in a recent survey conducted by Khalil Shikaki, the head of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research. His poll found that seventy-two per cent of respondents in the West Bank and Gaza believe that Hamas was “correct” to launch its terror attack. Just ten per cent said that Hamas had committed war crimes. The majority said they had not seen videos of Hamas fighters on their rampage—the very sort of evidence of shooting, looting, and butchery ubiquitous in the Israeli media and in social-media feeds.

Among Palestinians, particularly in the West Bank and Gaza, there is a

distinct reluctance to talk about, much less condemn, the massacre of October 7th. Because so many of them have come to disbelieve anything Israeli officials say, there is a reflex to discount reports of atrocities or hostage testimonies. As always in this century-long conflict, multiple truths—the Hamas massacre and the Israeli bombardment; the instances of horrific rape by Hamas combatants in southern Israel and the killing of thousands of children in Gaza; Hamas’s eliminationist ideology and Israel’s irreconcilable condition of being both an occupier and a democratic state—cannot be taken in all at once. To deal with every historical episode and contradiction, every cruelty, would be to complicate one’s loyalties to the breaking point.

Mustafa Barghouti, an independent politician in the West Bank, told me he feels “sad for every person killed, Israeli or Palestinian,” but insisted that the Western world was “talking only about Israelis,” and rarely Palestinians. “Hamas is the result of the occupation. They say Israel has a right to defend itself. Don’t Palestinians have the right to defend themselves?” Buttu, who said she was “shocked” by the brutality of the Hamas massacre, explains that she is offended when Jewish Israelis ask her about October 7th. “They are waiting for either a condemnation or some sort of sentiment, and it’s a form of dehumanization,” she told me. “It’s a questioning of my moral fibre. I don’t ask an Israeli about the fact that you are living in the aftermath of the Nakba”—the Arabic word means “catastrophe,” and refers to the mass dispossession of Palestinians during and after the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. “Or about how your father is a general who carried out crimes. It’s O.K. for them to question your moral fibre, whereas I have never done that to an Israeli.”

Hadas Ziv, the director of ethics and policy at Physicians for Human Rights Israel, has worked for years defending Palestinians in Israel and in the West Bank and Gaza. She advocates for the rights of migrants, asylum seekers, and prison detainees. Lately, she has been involved in gathering publicly available testimony and forensic evidence about the sexual assaults committed by Hamas, and says that the evidence points to rape, in this instance, being “a weapon of war.” (Hamas spokesmen have denied the accusation.) She has been

condemned by Palestinians online who find her latest work to be excessively “pro-Israeli.”

“This is part of what breaks my heart,” Ziv told me. “When I see Israelis and Palestinians, I see twins, people who are alike in so many ways, mirroring each other, yet they go on inflicting more and more trauma on each other to the point where we refuse to see each other.”

Itai Pessach is the director of the Edmond and Lily Safra Children’s Hospital, in Ramat Gan. Thirty-one of the hostages who were released in November came to his hospital for a few days of examination and rest, a “buffer” period before going home. Pessach helped care for nearly all of them. The hostages at the hospital ranged in age from four to eighty-four. None of them escaped physical injury, abuse, or trauma. The hostages he saw were not raped, he said, but sexually abused all the same. (“Touched” was the word Pessach used.) Some hostages were kept in tunnels equipped with holding cells; others were in apartments. The Hamas guards played incessant “mind games” with their captives, Pessach said, separating parents from children for extended periods to deepen their anxieties and their sense of dependency. They told hostages that they’d been forgotten by their government, that their towns had been destroyed and their loved ones killed. Some, Pessach recounted, were informed that they were being released and then heard, “Oh, sorry, now you are staying.”

Pessach witnessed deliriously happy reunions, with hostages running into the arms of their friends and families. Then he witnessed their more private grief-stricken “crashes” when they learned that a parent or a neighbor had been killed. And, for hours on end, he listened to their stories. “It is not different from the experiences that people have had in concentration camps,” he said. “When you hear them talk about conserving food or worrying about being alive in the morning or worrying every time the door opens or trying to figure out the slight differences between the terrorists. Or worrying about what they say or if they can dare to cry. I’ve heard testimonies over the years from

Holocaust survivors, and the choices parents had to make.”

He talked about a hostage in her thirties, Yarden Roman-Gat, from Kibbutz Be’eri, whose family was being pursued by Hamas soldiers and had to make an excruciating choice: she handed her three-year-old daughter, Geffen, to her husband, Alon, because he was the better runner. Alon sprinted off carrying Geffen and eventually hid in a ditch, for eight and a half hours. Yarden, who was running alone, grew exhausted after a while, fell to the ground, and tried to fool the Hamas terrorists who found her by playing dead. They picked her up, threw her in a car, and took her to Gaza, where she was a hostage for fifty-four days. She was released in November.

But there was one thing that Pessach was focussed on now: “When will the next group of captives come?” Or would there be any at all? Numerous sources had told me they were concerned that at least some remaining hostages had been so badly abused that it would not be in Hamas’s interest to turn them over. “Every day that passes, I get more worried,” Pessach said. “I see what captivity did over fifty days to the elderly women we accepted, to the children. I’m really worried that those who are there will not come back or that they’ll be in horrible shape.”

Pessach said he’d been watching interview shows on television in which former hostages described their experiences. He worries that doing so might hinder their recovery. “But I understand why they are doing it,” he said. “They seem to have no choice but to tell their stories. They feel it is their duty to the others still in captivity.”

... **h**at had been, until now, the most famous hostage crisis in the history of Israel was instrumental in Netanyahu’s rise to power. On June 27, 1976, two Palestinians affiliated with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and two Germans from a guerrilla group called the Revolutionary Cells hijacked an Air France flight carrying some two hundred and forty passengers from Tel Aviv to Paris after a stopover in Athens. Intent on freeing Palestinian prisoners in Israel and scoring a multimillion-dollar

ransom, the hijackers directed the flight to the Entebbe airport, in Uganda. This was the era of the Ugandan despot Idi Amin, who sent soldiers to support the hijackers when they landed.

As Israeli officials negotiated with the hijackers, Mossad and various military commanders devised a rescue plan led by Sayeret Matkal, an élite special-forces unit. Both Bibi Netanyahu and his older brother, Yonatan, did their military service with Sayeret Matkal, and Yonatan, known as Yoni, was selected to lead the mission at Entebbe. The scheme was almost preposterously daring, involving four cargo planes and two Boeing 707s. Flying over the Red Sea, the rescuers had to maintain an altitude of around a hundred feet to avoid radar detection. Inside one of the cargo planes was a black Mercedes equipped to look like Idi Amin's Presidential car. Once they landed at Entebbe, the Mercedes, with Yoni inside giving orders, led the charge toward the hijackers and their Israeli captives. The mission succeeded beyond all expectations, liberating nearly all the hostages. There were, however, casualties. Three of the Israeli hostages died. And Yoni Netanyahu was shot and killed.

It was left to Bibi Netanyahu to tell his parents the terrible news. He was in the United States at the time, working for the Boston Consulting Group and studying at M.I.T. Rather than call his parents in Ithaca, where his father had been a professor at Cornell, Bibi drove seven hours to see them, "a Via Dolorosa of unspeakable pain," he wrote later. "If there was a moment in my life worse than hearing about Yoni's death, it was telling my parents about it. I felt like a man on a rack whose limbs are torn from him one by one."

Eventually, the family collected Yoni's letters and published them as a book that became a talisman of national valor. Yoni came to represent the highest level of sacrifice, and the family name became ubiquitous in Israel. Being a brother, and a brother-in-arms, to a martyr seemed to give hard focus to Netanyahu's ambitions. Yoni, according to Netanyahu, once told a friend that Bibi had what it took to be Prime Minister one day. This, too, became part of

the legend. “Though Yoni had died in the war on terror, he never thought this battle was merely a military conflict,” Netanyahu has written. “He saw it also as a political and moral struggle between civilization and barbarism. I now devoted myself to this battle.”

In 1978, when he was twenty-eight, Netanyahu appeared on Boston public television, which carried a debate show called “The Advocates.” That night, at Faneuil Hall, the debate resolution was “Should the United States support ‘self-determination’ for Palestinians in a Middle East peace settlement?” With a fluid baritone and unaccented American English that would become familiar in the years to come from his many appearances on “Nightline” and “Meet the Press,” Netanyahu made the customary right-wing arguments of the time: There already was a Palestinian state—the Kingdom of Jordan. Besides, he said, Yasir Arafat and the Palestinians did not intend “to build a state but to destroy one,” the State of Israel.

After moving back to Israel, in the late seventies, the Netanyahus began a forum for antiterrorism studies in Yoni’s name, the Jonathan Institute. As the leader of the enterprise, Bibi befriended an array of wealthy donors, conservative intellectuals, and sympathetic politicians, from Norman Podhoretz to Henry Jackson. As a young politician, he moved rapidly up the ranks of the Likud Party, first serving, in the mid-eighties, as a diplomat at the U.N.—one with a particular gift for getting out the government’s distinctly conservative message, particularly for foreign consumption—and then as a shrewd party politician in the Knesset.

In 1996, following the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, Netanyahu won a term as Prime Minister, which lasted three years. He was the chair of the Likud Party in June, 2006, when another hostage crisis arose: an Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit, was captured by Hamas fighters who had entered the southern Israeli kibbutz of Kerem Shalom by tunnel. The fighters killed two Israeli soldiers, grabbed Shalit, and brought him to Gaza. The first Prime Minister who had to deal with the Shalit crisis, Ehud Olmert, refused to give in to what he called “extortion” by a “murderous” terror organization. But Shalit’s kidnapping wore

on the frayed nerves of Israeli society. Wasn't the purpose of the state to safeguard its citizens? Netanyahu became Prime Minister again in 2009, and two years later he made an astonishing deal, securing Shalit's release in exchange for more than a thousand Palestinian prisoners, some of them responsible for the deaths of multiple Israelis. One of the prisoners was Yahya Sinwar, a Hamas military leader, who returned home and eventually became the leader of Hamas in Gaza.

"Entebbe was a building block in the Israeli ethos, and it led people to have the belief that Israel will do anything to bring back hostages," Ilana Dayan told me. "That includes Gilad Shalit. It was far less heroic than Entebbe, but the state paid the highest price for one soldier."

Even before October 7th, the Shalit exchange had come under intense criticism; many thought that Netanyahu had done it to get out of a political jam, at a time when hundreds of thousands of Israelis had taken to the streets to protest a contracting economy. A few years ago, Olmert insisted that it "showed weakness, which damaged the State of Israel." But what Netanyahu must explain now is why neither he nor his upper echelon of security leaders heeded warnings from intelligence officers and military analysts that Hamas was preparing the operation that they named Al-Aqsa Flood. (The Prime Minister's office denies that Netanyahu received any early intelligence about a Hamas attack.) Among liberal, secular Israelis, Netanyahu has always been an object of scorn on a range of social and political issues, but now, across the ideological landscape, he stands accused of failing utterly on his promise of vigilance and security.

"Now all of a sudden the state is not there when the people are kidnapped," Dayan said. She had interviewed Yaffa Adar, an eighty-five-year-old resident of Kibbutz Nir Oz, who described how she was kidnapped by Hamas on October 7th and carried off to Gaza on a golf cart. Adar told Dayan that as she was riding toward the Strip she was looking up to the skies, searching for I.D.F. planes and helicopters, and wondering why they were not coming to rescue her.

“There was an absence of the state!” Dayan said. “We have never experienced this. Being an Israeli means that the sense of the state is internalized in you. It’s part of who you are. And all of a sudden, where is the state?”

In 2021, Netanyahu was voted out as Prime Minister after a dozen years; over time, his divisive rhetoric and ever-expanding arrogance alienated even some of his most loyal aides and ministers. And so he decided that he would write a memoir, not unlike his idol, Winston Churchill. “Bibi: My Story,” which was published in Hebrew and English in 2022, is a self-admiring tome, in which he is right in every argument, the hero of every anecdote. Across some seven hundred pages, he portrays himself as the singular guardian of Israel, his father’s son. Even when he appeared amenable to compromise—as when he delivered a speech at Bar-Ilan University, in 2009, that conveyed a wary and highly conditional openness to a Palestinian state—he did so tactically, to ease pressure from internal political currents and, more often, to get American Presidents off his back. In this instance, Barack Obama.

Most of his American interlocutors long ago came to understand the dodge. “The Bar-Ilan speech was part of his bullshit,” Martin Indyk, a former U.S. Ambassador to Israel, told me. “We met a day or two after the speech. He was all puffed up and he said to me, ‘All right, I *said* it, now can we get on to dealing with Iran?’ ”

In his memoir, Netanyahu describes Israel’s periodic clashes with Hamas, which took power in Gaza not long after the Israelis uprooted their settlements there, in 2005. Every couple of years or so, in his narrative, Hamas would fire rockets at Israeli cities and towns and Netanyahu would order far deadlier bombing raids. And then, following protests and pressure from foreign states, there would be negotiations and, eventually, a kind of peace. This pattern of prolonged periods of calm interspersed with military action came to be known as “mowing the lawn.” Netanyahu resisted calls to go further:

The public invariably expects the government to continue the battle and “flatten Gaza,” believing that with enough punishment the Hamas regime would collapse. Yet that would only happen if we sent in the army. The casualties would mount: many hundreds on the Israeli side and many thousands on the Palestinian side. Did I really want to tie down the IDF in Gaza for years when we had to deal with Iran and a possible Syrian front? The answer was categorically no. I had bigger fish to fry.

What Netanyahu scarcely acknowledges in his memoir is the security policy in which Israel allowed Qatar to bankroll Hamas, figuring that it would forgo the ecstasies of armed resistance and embrace the burdens of governance. In the meantime, Netanyahu could concentrate on subduing the restive West Bank and on weakening the Palestinian Authority, which struggled to administer it. This dual-track policy was also intended to muzzle any coherent demands for negotiations.

In the years to come, it became clear that Netanyahu’s grand strategy was to complete the conversion of Israel’s old Labor Zionist socialist economy to a wealthy free-market Startup Nation economy and to implement a new security paradigm, in which Israel formed political, military, and economic ties with Gulf Arab states to oppose the Tehran-led “axis of resistance.” In that plan, the Palestinians were hardly a priority. They could be easily contained, even ignored. “The road to a broader Middle East peace between Israel and the Arab world did not go *through* the Palestinian seat of government in Ramallah,” he wrote. “It went *around* it.” There was now no real need to annex the West Bank and its half million settlers. The settlers had annexed the State of Israel.

Three years ago, as Netanyahu was writing his book and serving as the leader of the opposition, he seemed as if he might ease into a well-upholstered retirement. His highest priority, it appeared, was to shake free of a series of criminal corruption indictments; he had been charged with everything from accepting illegal gifts—Cuban cigars, jewelry, champagne—to making a shady deal with a media baron to win favorable coverage. (Netanyahu has consistently denied any wrongdoing.) For a while, it seemed possible that he might accept a plea bargain in which he would not face jail time but instead

pay a fine and agree to stay out of politics. Such a deal had its allure. He and his wife, Sara, had long ago come to enjoy the largesse of friendly billionaires. Now he could sit on corporate boards, accept lucrative speaking engagements in the States, and enjoy the plaudits of that half of the country which still saw him as he saw himself: the sole Israeli statesman strong enough to stand up to homicidal ayatollahs, duplicitous Palestinians, credulous U.S. Presidents, sanctimonious human-rights organizations, and a ruthless liberal media.

In time, the plea-bargain talks collapsed, a new attorney general came on the scene, and Netanyahu reclaimed the one position that provided refuge from prosecution—his old job. At the end of 2022, he forged a hard-right coalition that allowed him to return as Prime Minister. He brought into the fold a raft of reactionaries, including his national-security minister, Itamar Ben-Gvir, and his finance minister, Bezalel Smotrich, both of whom endorse the full annexation of the West Bank and have recently called for the expulsion of Gaza's population. Netanyahu also pushed a wildly contentious "judicial reform" law; its opponents—perhaps more than half the country, some surveys suggested—feared that it would undermine the Supreme Court, the balance of powers, and democracy itself. The street demonstrations against the reform were unprecedented in scale and frequency; thousands of reservists, the core of the national defense in any wide-scale emergency, threatened not to show up for duty in protest. The defense minister, Yoav Gallant, finally deemed the proposed legislation a clear and present danger to national security, and asked Netanyahu to call it off. Netanyahu fired Gallant, and then, after more displays of public outrage on the street, he unfired him.

It wasn't just the Tel Aviv left that had come to view Netanyahu as a threat to the state. Even old allies on the right could no longer ignore the spectacle of his narcissism and self-dealing. Michael Oren, a former member of the Knesset and Ambassador to the U.S. under Netanyahu, was one of many who trotted out the apocryphal remark of Louis XIV, "*L'état, c'est moi*"—the state is me—to characterize the Prime Minister's attitude. Netanyahu, Oren told me, "seems unable to distinguish between personal and political interests." Ami

Ayalon, the former head of Shin Bet, the country's internal security service, described Netanyahu to me as "a person who will sell out everyone and everything in order to stay in power." Moshe Ya'alon, the defense minister from 2013 to 2016, told me that Netanyahu's ideology is now "personal political survival," adding that his coalition partners "don't represent the vast majority of the Israeli people" and are "so messianic that they believe in Jewish supremacy—'Mein Kampf' in the opposite direction. They've taken Netanyahu hostage."

Meanwhile, the leader of Hamas in Gaza, Yahya Sinwar, and the head of the military wing, Mohammed Deif, appear to have seen what Gallant saw: that Israel was consumed with its own divisions; that the state, including the Israel Defense Forces, was overstretched, distracted, and dysfunctional. The security establishment was reportedly receiving information about a potentially colossal disaster. Officers in Unit 8200, an intelligence group in the I.D.F., provided senior officers with detailed and alarming information about Hamas training exercises inside Gaza in which combatants practiced raids on mocked-up kibbutzim much like the ones just over the fence in southern Israel. One intercepted Hamas communication said, "We have completed killing all the residents of the kibbutz." According to Israeli media reports, the intelligence was dismissed by senior officers as "imaginary." (An I.D.F. spokesman said that "questions of this kind will be looked into at a later stage.")

In both March and July of 2023, Brigadier General Amit Saar, the head of the research division at military intelligence, wrote to the Prime Minister warning that Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran recognized that Israel was "in a blistering, unprecedented crisis threatening its cohesion" and saw an opportunity "to create the perfect storm." According to *Haaretz*, Saar concluded that the enemy saw Israel's chaos and vulnerability as "the practical fulfillment of their basic world view—Israel is a foreign implant, a weak, divided society that will ultimately disappear."

Even if Netanyahu was unwilling to take Gallant or Saar seriously, he was certainly capable of imagining the worst on his own. His prescience was a

point of pride, after all. In his memoir, he depicts himself as clear-eyed, informed, always one step ahead. “It was tunnel warfare on a grand scale,” Netanyahu wrote, describing the run-up to Operation Protective Edge, in the summer of 2014, in which Israel responded to Hamas rocket attacks with aerial bombardment and tanks. “Hamas intended to surprise Israel by initiating the simultaneous penetration of *hundreds* of terrorists into the country. They planned to enter kindergartens and schools, murder Israelis and whisk dozens of hostages to Gaza back through the tunnels. This could spell disaster.”

Eight years later, Sinwar made little secret of his ultimate intentions. “We will come to you, God willing, in a roaring flood,” he said in a speech in December, 2022. “We will come to you with endless rockets, we will come to you in a limitless flood of soldiers, we will come to you with millions of our people, like the repeating tide.” Netanyahu’s attention was elsewhere.

Late one afternoon, I went to Rishon LeZion, a city south of Tel Aviv, to visit Avichai Brodutch. When I first met him, in October, he had set up a one-man vigil outside the Kirya defense compound to call on the government to do more to bring home his wife and three small children, who had been taken to Gaza from their home in Kibbutz Kfar Aza. He attracted a crowd that soon turned into a large anti-government demonstration. When we talked that day, he chose his words carefully, lest he say something to anger Hamas and further endanger his family. But now his family had come home, part of the exchange in November of a hundred and five hostages for two hundred and forty Palestinian prisoners. He could speak more freely.

We were at the house of a friend of his, where a back-yard barbecue was in full swing, with loads of kids running around: sausages, hot dogs, and burgers on the grill. It was a joyful gathering, but one where people talked of the hostages still in Gaza. Brodutch’s wife, Hagar, was running late, and Brodutch said she might not come at all: “She’s having a very hard time.” Their three children—Ofri, Yuval, and Uriah—were happily playing with Legos and eating more

than their fill. Brodutch encouraged their consumption. In captivity, the family had been given meagre rations, often no more than a piece of pita bread. They were held mainly in apartments, not in tunnels, as many were. But they came home pale, weak, thin, covered in lice.

As his kids now played safely at his side, Brodutch was able to tell me what had happened on October 7th. A farmer who has been preparing to be an emergency-room nurse, he is also an occasional amateur photographer. “Whenever there was rocket fire from Gaza, I would take pictures,” he recalled. At around six-thirty in the morning, there was a prolonged barrage of rocket fire. He went out to take pictures and ducked inside for a moment to tell Hagar that this was “tenfold different,” more rocket fire than they’d ever seen. “I came back outside to take my photos and that’s when I saw a motorized paraglider in the air, Hamas—and my heart just fell.” He told his wife to get in their safe room with the children. As a member of Kfar Aza’s civil security team, he was about to run to the armory when there was a delicate knock at the door.

“I looked through the peephole,” he said, “and saw a little girl.” She was Avigail Idan, a neighbor’s three-year-old daughter. “I opened the door, but she ran away. I yelled, ‘Avigail, come back!’ I ran after her, picked her up. She was smeared with blood, but not hurt.” Hagar, Avigail, and the Brodutch children took refuge in the safe room.

Brodutch ran toward the armory, through people’s yards: “Then they were firing on us. People started falling. Friends of mine were killed next to me. By some miracle, I managed to survive that. I got a message that there was gunfire at a friend’s house. So I ran over there.” He remembered not just gunfire but the blasts of grenades, R.P.G.s. “Now I was injured, with shrapnel in my right leg. I couldn’t carry on fighting. A friend who came to rescue me got hit in the leg as well. He was bleeding a lot, so he used my belt and my magazine for a tourniquet.”

The Hamas fighters finally scattered, and he recalled some local police arriving

a couple of hours later. “I got a message from my wife on WhatsApp. At 11 A.M., she wrote, ‘They are coming in the house.’ That was the last message I got. I was sure they had all been killed.” It was only a day later that he learned that his family, along with Avigail, had been taken hostage. Avigail didn’t know it, but she was now an orphan; her parents had both been murdered in their home. The blood on Avigail was her father’s. He’d been shot while holding her.

After fifty-one days in captivity, Hagar and the children, along with Avigail, were released. In Gaza, Hagar had had no news of her husband. She was convinced that he’d been killed. When they finally greeted each other, the children were smiling, wildly happy to see their father and their beloved chocolate-brown Ridgeback. “But my wife was not smiling,” Brodutch recalled. “She knew the situation.”

Initially, the kids seemed fine. They talked about the card game they’d devised while in Gaza. They played with all the new toys they were given after they were released. But there were long sleepless nights to come. For the children, Brodutch said, a dark room or being separated from Hagar or even just a loud noise could “reignite the trauma.”

As Brodutch told their story, Ofri, his ten-year-old daughter, his eldest, settled into his lap. He asked her what she thought about in Gaza. She said she was always dreaming about food.

“What were you hungry for?” he said.

“Sushi—there’s no sushi in Gaza!” she said, laughing. Then she grew more serious and said, “We thought about you, Abba. Sometimes I thought you were alive. Sometimes I thought you were dead.”

In mid-December, the news came that Israeli soldiers on patrol in Gaza City accidentally shot three hostages whose captors had been killed. The hostages were stripped to the waist and holding up an improvised white flag in surrender; one spoke in Hebrew. They’d even spray-painted the words “SOS”

and “Help, 3 hostages” on a building nearby. Still, the soldiers seemed to think it was a trap. Two of the slain were family friends of the Brodutches from Kfar Aza. “Hagar was just getting on her feet, and this news devastated her,” Brodutch said. In fact, the news made many Israelis throughout the country worried about their own Army; it made some of them think harder about the ruthlessness of the operation in Gaza, the death count climbing every day.

“You know, when people were out on the streets, I never understood what they were protesting against,” Brodutch said. “They were talking about democracy, and it didn’t speak to me. I really had the best life. We had a swimming pool at the kibbutz. The kids would play. We’d have friends come over for dinner and we would drink, and I would say, ‘What are you protesting?’ And they would speak in these phrases.”

What appalls him now is a lack of accountability in Netanyahu’s government. “No one is taking blame for *this*,” he said. “Someone had to come from the government and say, ‘This was our fault.’ Especially about the hostages. ‘This is our fault, and we are going to do everything we can to bring them home.’ But they are not saying that. If these hostages are killed, this country has no right to keep on going. Israel was established after the Holocaust, and it had one mission: never again. This happened on Israeli soil—and not just to Jews but to Muslims, Arabs, and Thais. If a ceasefire is necessary to bring them home, then yes. Israel should be thinking about one thing only: bring back the hostages.”

But the era of Gilad Shalit is over. In an interview with Israel’s Channel 12, Hagar Brodutch described how she and the children were being held by their captors in a building next to one that was being shelled by the I.D.F. She described how difficult it was to explain to them that “it is their own Army that was supposed to protect them there in their home, where they instead abandoned them. Now the I.D.F. was shelling them while they are inside Gaza. And it didn’t stop. With each passing day, you tell yourself it can’t be. It doesn’t make sense. They know I’m here. They know my children are here. This is the most important asset Israel has, our children. . . . And then in

hindsight, when I came back, I saw we were not the most important priority of the Israeli government.” I told Avichai Brodutch what officials had told me—that in wartime it was *important* to bring home the hostages, but the *priority* was winning the war.

“That’s what I hear, too,” Brodutch said, and he went on stroking his daughter’s hand.

The war went on, brutally. The Israeli air strikes aimed at Hamas commanders and fighters, tunnels and munitions supplies, were killing civilians, dozens at a time. With no warning, on October 31st, the Israelis, according to the *Times*, dropped two-thousand-pound bombs on the Jabalia refugee camp, one of the most densely populated precincts of Gaza, killing at least a hundred and twenty-six people, many of them children. An I.D.F. spokesman said the mission had succeeded in killing Ibrahim Biari, a leader of the October 7th attack. The spokesman also issued the by now familiar regrets for civilian losses, pointing out that Hamas used civilians as “human shields.” In late December, Israel dropped similarly large bombs on the Al-Maghazi neighborhood, in central Gaza, killing dozens more Palestinians, many of whom had fled there from the northern part of the Strip. “The I.D.F. regrets the harm to uninvolved individuals, and is working to draw lessons from the incident,” a spokesman said. But, despite international condemnation and the Biden Administration’s pressure on Netanyahu to scale back the attacks, the bombing continued, as did the ritual statements. (The Prime Minister’s office insists that the I.D.F., under Netanyahu’s direction, has done “its utmost to avoid civilian casualties.”)

The denunciations from Palestinian leaders were constant, and none more eloquent than a Christmas sermon delivered by the theologian Munther Isaac, in the West Bank city of Bethlehem. Isaac excoriated foreign governments for being “complicit” in the ongoing war. Christ was “under the rubble,” he said. “How is the killing of nine thousand children self-defense?” Hassan Jabareen, the Palestinian Israeli human-rights lawyer, compared the Israeli assault on

Gaza to guerrilla wars and military follies of the past—to Afghanistan, Iraq, and particularly Vietnam, where the guerrilla forces lost battle after battle by conventional markers but went on waging a war of attrition and, finally, outlasted their enemies. “Can we really imagine that Hamas will raise a white flag?” Jabareen said.

Mustafa Barghouti, the independent politician in the West Bank, compared the devastation in Gaza to that of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and told me the war being waged now was a “genocide.” Jabareen used the same word, as do so many Palestinians, and I asked him to define what he meant. “Genocide is when you destroy the infrastructure and the culture and the bodies of people,” he said. “In Gaza, they are destroying complete cities, mosques and universities, schools and courts and hospitals. One per cent of the citizens of Gaza have been killed. Most are civilians. You are killing them and divorcing them from where they live. You have a memory of time and place, and now the place is not there.”

These considerations hold little sway with the Israel leadership, which has dismissed the genocide charges that South Africa has brought against it in The Hague as a “blood libel.” Israel might ratchet down the bombing, pull back some troops, and move into a more targeted phase of the attempt to defeat Hamas as a military force, but officials say that they will not relent in their hunt for the Hamas leaders, particularly Yahya Sinwar. In the popular Israeli discourse, Sinwar is Osama bin Laden, the embodiment of the enemy. Netanyahu appealed to Hamas directly: “I say to the terrorists of Hamas: It’s over. Don’t die for Sinwar. Surrender now.”

Born in a refugee camp, Sinwar was a prisoner in Israel from 1989 to 2011, and learned to speak fluent Hebrew. He follows the Israeli press, and seems to understand the nuances of the Israeli political scene far better than his fellow Hamas leaders, particularly the ones who live in opulence in Qatar or Lebanon. In November, Israeli newspapers started publishing passages from Sinwar’s interrogations while in custody. According to the reports, Sinwar described consulting with the founder and leader of Hamas, Sheikh Ahmed

Yassin, about rooting out and punishing collaborators with Israel. He coolly recounted having arrested a collaborator named Ramsi as he lay in bed with his wife in Khan Yunis:

We put him in a car and drove to the cemetery in Khan Yunis. We didn't tell Ramsi what we were going to do. While we interrogated him we didn't beat him much. On the way, I blindfolded him with a rag so he couldn't see. . . . I put him inside a large grave and strangled him with a kaffiyeh I had. After strangling him, I wrapped him in a white shroud and closed the grave. I was sure that Ramsi knew he deserved to die.

Michael Koubi, a former Shin Bet officer who spent hundreds of hours interrogating Sinwar, described him to me as consumed with hatred for Jews and infidels and so devoted to the cause that, for a long time, he refused to have a family. Koubi said, "Sinwar told me, ' Hamas is my wife, Hamas is my child.' " But Sinwar was also a crafty operative, in Koubi's appraisal, adept at organizing arms shipments into Gaza from abroad and building the Strip's extensive network of tunnels and underground bunkers.

"There is a popular notion that he is somehow a crazy guy who has lost contact with reality," Michael Milshtein, the former head of Palestinian intelligence for the I.D.F., told me. "Those terms reflect our lack of understanding. He is a very radical ideological leader, but you need to get into this logic. It's a logic with a different kind of values and we need to understand that." He went on, " Hamas promotes a dramatic, historic jihad against Israel, and maybe it won't be a total defeat of Israel, but it's an important way station on the way to defeat the Zionist entity and to control the al-Aqsa Mosque, in Jerusalem. This is the atmosphere he lives in. October 7th was the mission of his life. It's not a tactical or strategic move. He wants to be remembered in the history books as the new Saladin, the one who cost Israel a historic defeat. Maybe he will be killed. It doesn't matter." Koubi, Sinwar's interrogator, agreed. "Right now, Sinwar is deep underground, but I can't imagine him surrendering. He wants to be a *shahid*, a martyr, a historical hero." According to reports in the Israeli media, the I.D.F. believes that he is hiding in tunnels in the Khan Yunis area and has surrounded himself with Israeli hostages as

protection. (The I.D.F. declined to comment on this matter.)

Ami Ayalon, the former head of Shin Bet, told me that on October 7th Sinwar chose a “Samson option.” The plan was “diabolical,” Ayalon said, “but he brought the house down.” A conventional military defeat will not be important to Sinwar. “He will be rooted in the hearts of the Palestinians. And the only way for him to be defeated is to present a better idea, meaning a political horizon for two states. Sheikh Yassin once expressed that his biggest fear was that the Palestinians would come to believe that the Israelis will give them a state. Which, of course, Yassin saw as a betrayal of greater Palestine.”

Today, the prospect of two states for two people has never seemed more necessary or more distant. Fury and trauma dominate. The absolutists reign. Hussein Agha, a Lebanese academic who has worked as a negotiator for the Palestinians since before the Oslo Accords, told me that the experience of watching October 7th and its aftermath has been “a dagger in my heart. It reminds me that I am a loser. For fifty-five years, I’ve been trying to do something and now it culminates in an act of brutality—acts of brutality on both sides. It’s all meaningless. It didn’t amount to a hill of beans.”

He went on, “The Palestinians have been on the receiving end of brutality for a hundred years, and now was their chance to show they could do this. And it’s important to note that almost no Palestinians stood against it, except some N.G.O.s, which get Western money. Even Abu Mazen”—Mahmoud Abbas, the President of the Palestinian Authority—“cannot come out clearly against it. This runs deep inside the Palestinian psyche, this very act. It borders on the Biblical. It has nothing to do with politics or the interaction of the two peoples. It’s revenge. It comes out of a feud festering over decades, even centuries.” And even in the ruins of Gaza—amid all the suffering, death, destruction, and dislocation—many will revere Yahya Sinwar as an icon of armed resistance in the Palestinian national cause. “His picture from now on will be next to Arafat’s everywhere,” Agha told me. “His picture will be in the pocket of every Palestinian teen-ager. Even if the Israelis kill him, he is a hero. The important result of this war was over the night of October 7th. The rest is

revenge. The I.D.F. cannot kill Hamas. It's everywhere."

On a cool, sunny morning in December, I made my way north from Tel Aviv, past the Sea of Galilee, to Kiryat Shmona, a small city on the Lebanese border that has long been under threat from the forces of Hezbollah, the Party of God. Kiryat Shmona and the surrounding villages are ghost towns now. More than eighty thousand people in the area have left or been evacuated. There have been casualties almost daily on both sides in the past few months. "It has definitely not been quiet," an officer from Israel's Northern Command told me. "This is the most active it's been here since the Second Lebanon War. There's antitank missile fire, drones packed with C4, mortar fire every day."

It is folly to guess what Sinwar, the presumed mastermind of Al-Aqsa Flood, thought would happen in every detail when he unleashed his rampage. But it is not unreasonable to infer that he hoped to ignite an all-out regional uprising against Israel, with Hezbollah in the lead. Many of the tactics and instruments of Al-Aqsa Flood were devised years ago by Hezbollah. As a fighting force, Hezbollah is far better trained and better equipped than Hamas. According to estimates by defense and intelligence experts, Hezbollah has tens of thousands of regional fighters throughout Lebanon and roughly twenty-five hundred elite commandos known as the Radwan; its arsenal features thousands of sophisticated missiles, many of them capable of hitting targets throughout Israel. Israeli security officials say that their forces are ultimately capable of defeating Hezbollah, but admit that a full-scale war would have Israeli citizens confined to bomb shelters and safe rooms for prolonged periods.

Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, is no less zealous than Sinwar in his stated desire to erase Israel from the map. But he has different constituencies and political concerns. Contemporary Lebanon is both a multiethnic state and a failed state. If Nasrallah were to attack Israel, he would be held responsible for the inevitable Israeli reprisals and the potential devastation not only of his Shia constituents in southern Lebanon but of Beirut. "You will pay an

unimaginable price,” Netanyahu warned Hezbollah in early November. And Nasrallah has more than just the Israeli Air Force to contend with. One of the first things Biden did after October 7th was to park two aircraft carriers in the eastern Mediterranean.

Nevertheless, there are some in the Israeli hierarchy who want the fight—and not just Ben-Gvir and Smotrich. In the first days after October 7th, there was an intense debate among Israeli and American officials over Nasrallah’s intention. Did he want to go all in with Hamas? The Americans told the Israelis that Hezbollah did not necessarily want a head-on clash with the I.D.F. and that Netanyahu and his generals, who had warplanes in the air waiting for orders, should back off. Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot, the two former generals brought into the unity government and war council, gave Netanyahu the same advice, and, in the end, he gave the order to stand down.

Accompanied by an Israeli journalist, a senior I.D.F. officer from the Northern Command, and a few other soldiers, I went even closer to the border, to Metula, the northernmost town in Israel. At times, we were no more than fifty metres from the border. The yellow-and-green Hezbollah flag, with its image of a fist hoisting an assault rifle, billowed lazily in the nearby hills above us. When we crossed the small streets of Metula, we were told to run: “We’re in the line of fire here.” Two soldiers had been injured nearby the day before. “And today is typical,” the senior officer said. “There were missiles at 8 A.M. and we responded. And it goes on like that throughout the day.” Hezbollah sends drones over Israeli towns and military positions. The Israelis respond with air strikes, hitting command towers, rocket-launching platforms, arms depots. “They are getting more aggressive and so are we. But we are not escalating.”

Later that afternoon, we had lunch with Shadi Khaloul, a Maronite Christian Israeli and a former I.D.F. officer, at a small hummus place in Jish, a village a few miles south of the border. The village’s population is mostly Maronites and Muslim Arabs. Khaloul said he was so concerned about the danger from Hezbollah that he sent his family abroad for several weeks. He remained

concerned about a war with Hezbollah, and possibly a broader regional war. Qasem Soleimani, the leader of the Iranian Quds Force who was killed four years ago in a U.S. attack, envisioned a strategic encirclement of Israel by pro-Iranian forces. Since then, Sinwar and Hamas had exposed the vulnerability of Israel's vaunted military and intelligence capabilities. "Even though Hezbollah did not join the attack on October 7th, they can still do it," Khaloul said. "They are sure to be looking for a second opportunity."

Back in the relative safety of Tel Aviv that night, I watched the news. The lead story was on resurgent fighting in the north. Casualties in Metula. Casualties in the Lebanese villages across the border. About two weeks later, Israel used a drone strike to kill Saleh al-Arouri, a senior leader of Hamas, in Beirut. Hezbollah promised reprisals, and delivered them, bombing an Israeli air-traffic-control base on Mt. Meron, in the north. Meanwhile, Antony Blinken, the U.S. Secretary of State, was shuttling from one capital to the next. Gaza was the essential subject, but so, too, was the fevered attempt to forestall a full-scale conflict on a second front. I recalled what Khaloul said would happen if it came to a war with Hezbollah: "The doors of Hell would open."

In late 1973, the chief justice of the Israeli Supreme Court, Shimon Agranat, chaired an inquiry into the reasons that the Israeli security establishment and the government, led by Prime Minister Golda Meir, proved so unprepared for the attacks by Egypt and Syria, in the conflict known in Israel as the Yom Kippur War. That October, the Israelis had lost more than two thousand soldiers and, for days, faced the prospect of horrific defeat until turning the tide. (In one example of Sinwar's historical consciousness, he launched Al-Aqsa Flood exactly fifty years after the first full day of the Yom Kippur War.) The findings of the Agranat Commission were so devastating that several top officials resigned. The commission cleared Meir of responsibility for the calamity, but Meir, declaring that it was "beyond my strength to continue carrying this burden," stepped down as Prime Minister in April, 1974, and gave up her seat in the Knesset.

Netanyahu, in his memoir, is airily contemptuous of Meir and her defense minister, Moshe Dayan, saying that they had failed to react to a warning from an Egyptian Mossad asset about an imminent attack. “Golda Meir should have known better,” he wrote. But now some version of the Agranat Commission awaits Netanyahu. Although he denies that he was ever fully informed about the possibility of a major Hamas attack—and is almost sure to place the blame for the disaster on his military and security chiefs—it had been his policy to allow the funding of Hamas and, as his memoir makes plain, he knew Sinwar’s history and the capabilities of the armed wing of Hamas.

Leaders of the military and the security services have publicly acknowledged responsibility for the failures that led to October 7th. Netanyahu has said only that questions of responsibility will eventually be examined. Anshel Pfeffer, a *Haaretz* reporter and the author of a 2018 biography of Netanyahu, told me that the Prime Minister is always quick to take credit, but not responsibility: “If tomorrow Shin Bet discovered the hole that Sinwar is in and Sayeret Matkal put his head on a pike and the hostages were freed, Bibi would be there to take the credit.” Dennis Ross, a veteran U.S. diplomat in the Middle East, agreed, telling me, “He has been Prime Minister since 2009, except for one year. Can you think of him ever taking responsibility for anything?”

In conversations with former Prime Ministers, Knesset members, Israeli journalists, defense and intelligence officials, businesspeople, hostage families, and many others, I found general agreement that something like the following is bound to happen: as the war shifts to a lower, less “kinetic” level, thousands of reservists who were active in the judicial-reform protests and who are now fighting in Gaza will join anti-government demonstrations. “They will go home, take a shower, and then take to the streets,” the former Prime Minister Yair Lapid told me. “These are good Israelis fighting admirably but also angry as hell at Netanyahu and this bunch of lunatics he’s surrounded himself with.”

Nearly all my sources added that, though Netanyahu is in deep political peril and could face a vote of no confidence or an election as soon as this summer, it would be unwise to count him out. “I go to funerals of politicians to make sure

they are buried,” Nahum Barnea, a longtime columnist for *Yedioth Ahronoth*, told me. “But comebacks are possible.” Especially for Netanyahu. His guile in building coalitions is unmatched in Israeli politics and only improved when he dispensed with principle to join with the likes of Ben-Gvir and Smotrich. Moreover, when support for Hamas runs so high in the West Bank, with the country feeling so damaged, so insecure, it is hard to imagine any of Netanyahu’s potential opponents taking up the issue of a two-state solution.

The moments when Netanyahu shows disdain for Biden are galling to American diplomats, but they play to his base. “The extent to which Netanyahu is desperate is manifested in his willingness to bite the hand that feeds him,” Martin Indyk told me. “His sheer survival instinct is to show he can stand up to America. He boasts about it.” Aaron David Miller, a former U.S. State Department Middle East negotiator and analyst who is now a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, told me, “The political narcissism that has driven his career, particularly in the last decade, is astonishing. The challenges that Israel faces are incredible and yet its leader measures every single decision with an asterisk: What does this mean in terms of my political career and my freedom?”

“Politically, Bibi sold himself as Mr. Security, but that was obliterated on October 7th,” a leading conservative in the Knesset told me. “Now he is Mr. Standing Up to America Who Will Impose on Us a Palestinian State. He is pivoting. After his grand failure, he needs a new story. He is going to try to sell the story that the security establishment failed, not him, and he is the only one to kill a Palestinian state.”

When the war downshifts, Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot are almost certain to leave Netanyahu’s war council and become, once more, his political opponents. Gantz, the leading contender to replace Netanyahu, is already mapping out a run with various advisers. Pfeffer published a long profile of him several years ago in *Haaretz*, when Gantz was crossing over from a military to a political career. At lunch one afternoon, he told me that Gantz rarely takes a firm position on controversial issues, including the Palestinian

question, and is a “blank canvas” onto which voters can project their hopes and aspirations. His parents, born in Romania and Hungary, were Holocaust survivors. Although they were secular, they raised Gantz in a mainly religious moshav in south-central Israel. Tall, laconic, and handsome, he is the sort of officer with whom you hope to do your reserve duty.

Gantz is the not-Netanyahu. He was not responsible for dividing the country. He did not forge alliances with reactionary ministers and set out to undermine the Supreme Court. He was not responsible for the biggest security lapse in the history of the state. But what language will he deploy against the longest-serving Prime Minister in Israeli history? Many Israelis now, in their sense of rage and trauma, are no less suspicious of the Palestinians than Benzion Netanyahu was seventy-five years ago. In fact, the demonstrators last year avoided the topic for fear of narrowing the consensus against judicial reform. When it comes to the Palestinians, Gantz speaks only vaguely of a separate “entity,” or a “two-entity solution.”

“We want our country back. We want to feel safe again.” That’s what Netanyahu says his supporters told him when he was out of power a few years ago, urging him to reclaim the office. On page after page, his memoir is filled with illustrations of his magnificent foresight and unparalleled successes in cementing his nation’s security. He explains how in May, 2021, in Operation Guardian of the Walls, miles of Gaza’s underground tunnel network were destroyed, in a coup that “set Hamas back at least a decade.” The operation “worked perfectly,” he boasts. “We had neutralized the tunnel threat.”

The longer the war goes on—and, according to top military analysts, it is not going nearly as well or as quickly as the I.D.F. had hoped—the more time Netanyahu will have to rebuild his base and undermine potential challengers. “Netanyahu has an interest in never finishing this stage of war,” Nahum Barnea said. The Prime Minister’s announced “prerequisites for peace,” certainly, do not suggest he is looking for an off-ramp: “Hamas must be destroyed, Gaza must be demilitarized, and Palestinian society must be deradicalized.” Yet Hamas has always been a product as well as a purveyor of

brutality, and the Prime Minister hardly needs to be instructed in the gap between his political interests and the larger realities. Recounting a previous crisis in his memoir, he took pains to edify his readers on the subject. A full-blown war with Hamas, he wrote, would be a “hollow” spectacle with no satisfying end. “The Hamas leaders would come out from their holes and declare victory among the ruins.” ♦

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