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Bibi's First War

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Bibi's First War

Why Benjamin Netanyahu Has Never Liked Military Conflict

By [Hussein Ibish](#) ^[2]

JULY

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu attends a graduation ceremony for naval officers in 2012. (Courtesy F

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he best description of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's political style is that he is risk-averse. His entire career has been defined by careful calculation, caution, and a steadfast commitment to the status quo. Few in Israel seem to love him, but they do regard him as safe and reliable. And that has been a remarkably effective formula for staying in power in a country whose governments rarely serve out their full term.

Yet suddenly, Netanyahu has found himself well outside of his comfort zone. His government has been sucked into a major conflict with Hamas and other extremists in Gaza, and it has no clear strategic goal or even an obvious exit strategy. Netanyahu is thus in the very position he's least at ease with: he is at the mercy of events and other actors outside his control. He might hope that when tensions calm he will end up where he wants to be -- the familiar status quo that he has always found politically comfortable. But that status quo, characterized by occupation and radical inequality in the Palestinian territories, is unsustainable and exceptionally dangerous for Israel, Palestine, and the region as a whole.

Netanyahu's remarkable rise to prolonged political power in Israel, particularly in his extended second term, has been based on his impressive ability to position himself between Israel's two poles: those who want peace with the Palestinians and those who want to consolidate control over the occupied territories. He is a supporter of the settler movement, but not a rabid one. Settlers and their leaders have frequently accused him of "silent" or "de facto" building freezes, and his government has demolished a number of wildcat settlement outposts (although it has also recognized many others).

He professes to be a proponent of a two-state solution, but both his policies and his rhetoric leave grave doubts about his commitment to that outcome. At a recent press conference, Netanyahu undermined any hopes that he is truly open to a real two-state solution. "I think the Israeli people understand now what we always say: that there cannot be a situation, under any agreement, in which we relinquish security control of the territory west of the River Jordan," Netanyahu said, effectively ruling out the establishment of a truly independent, sovereign, and viable Palestinian state. In other words, his vision of the long-term future between Israel and the Palestinians is the status quo, defined by occupation and the rule over another people deprived of rights and citizenship, extended indefinitely.

Netanyahu seems content to leave things basically as they are, tinkering on the margins with new settlements and other small changes that may have a profound cumulative effect, but only in the long run. Anything else would be too risky. To restrain the settlers would mean a confrontation with the far right. To go in for annexation would provoke a massive diplomatic crisis. Netanyahu prefers, instead, to just allow the possibility of a two-state solution to fade away slowly, but inexorably. Indeed, in spite of widespread psychological speculation about the influence of his late father, a noted anti-Arab extremist, and his wife, whose cantankerous personality has been well documented, Netanyahu seems very much to follow his own counsel, which is apparently driven by a belief that the less done on major issues, the better for him.

Netanyahu does have some history of recklessness, but only when it comes to other people's fortunes. Supporters of former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who was assassinated in 1995, bitterly accuse Netanyahu of orchestrating a campaign of public vilification that led to Rabin's murder. And there is plenty of evidence that he did: Netanyahu appeared at rallies featuring posters of Rabin in Nazi SS uniforms and with crosshairs over his face. Netanyahu [fulminated](#) ^[3] that Rabin's government was "removed from Jewish tradition ... and Jewish values" by seeking peace with the Palestinians. Rabin warned that Netanyahu was promoting a climate of violence, an evaluation that proved apt when Rabin was soon after gunned down by a young Jewish extremist.

Another risky political move was merging his Likud party list with that of the far-right party Yisrael Beytenu in the last elections. It was a personal and ideological mismatch from the outset, and seemed to cost both parties at the polls. The merger recently fell [apart](#) ^[4], which has probably only reinforced Netanyahu's risk aversion.

With all his caution, Netanyahu has managed during his time in power to avoid leading the country in a major conflict. He was prime minister during a significant eight-day flare-up with Gaza in November 2012, but that couldn't be characterized as a fully fledged war in the same way that the current conflagration must be because it was short and contained, and Netanyahu always appeared to be in control of events as they unfolded.

By contrast, the current conflict seems to embody Netanyahu's deep aversion to unpredictable politics. It began with the kidnapping of three Israeli teenagers in the occupied West Bank by militants that were associated with Hamas but had quite possibly gone rogue. The Israeli authorities knew all along that that the teenagers had been killed soon after the kidnapping, thanks to a phone call that they made to the police in which their murder could clearly be heard. But the authorities withheld that information from the public in order to carry out a massive crackdown on Hamas in the West Bank, disguised as an effort to rescue the boys.

When their bodies were discovered after 18 days, Netanyahu's government seemed ready to call it a day. He signaled that he wasn't interested in a major escalation in Gaza; Israelis had been down that road before, twice in a significant way, and had learned that blowing up buildings and killing people doesn't change Hamas' behavior or the strategic situation on the ground. But because Netanyahu's government had deceived the public, the recovery of the boys' bodies unleashed a fresh wave of anger. When Jewish Israeli fanatic nabbed, tortured, and burned alive a 16-year-old Palestinian boy in Jerusalem

and then video emerged of the Israeli border police brutally beating his 15-year-old cousin, events took on a life of their own. Unrest spread throughout the West Bank and in Palestinian areas of Israel. The Israeli crackdown intensified. Rocket attacks from Gaza increased, and Netanyahu ultimately felt politically compelled to act, despite [evident](#) ^[5] misgivings from the military.

And so now, for the first time in his career, Netanyahu finds himself presiding over the chaos of a war that seems very much outside his control. Hamas has launched countless rockets at Israel, including parts of the country previously beyond its range, and Netanyahu has unleashed an enormous barrage against a vast range of targets in the Gaza Strip, including the homes and neighborhoods of Hamas [leaders](#) ^[6]. Israeli airstrikes have left more than 200 Palestinians dead and the United Nations estimates that 80 percent of them are civilians. An intensified fear hangs over Israel as Hamas and other groups demonstrate the reach of their latest rockets. Although the Hamas rockets have been largely ineffectual, several Israelis have been injured and at least one has been killed.

It would've taken real courage, and a willingness to embrace political risk, for Netanyahu to listen to wiser counsel and avoid this pointless exchange of violence. It isn't clear whether Israel can achieve any major objectives in this war beyond killing people and blowing up civilian property and paramilitary installations, which is unlikely to achieve any major political or strategic goals and could do significant further harm to Israel's international and regional reputation. And the conundrum is made worse by the fact that Israel actually wants Hamas to stay in power in Gaza, both because Hamas is a known quantity that can be held accountable for its transgressions and because Israel fears the anarchy or the other, more extreme, groups that could rise in its absence. So Israel can go only so far unless it decides to, once again, assume wholesale responsibility for what happens in, and who controls, Gaza.

In recent days, a number of influential Israeli voices have advocated just that. On Tuesday Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman criticized Netanyahu's "hesitation" and [declared](#) ^[7] that the current offensive should end with "a full takeover of the Gaza Strip" by Israel. Netanyahu [responded](#) ^[8] by saying that he would ignore "background noise," a clear rebuke to Lieberman. And after coming under severe criticism by Likud leader and Deputy Defense Minister Danny Danon, Netanyahu curtly [dismissed](#) ^[9] him. The far right continues to push for a major ground operation in Gaza, but Netanyahu seems determined to stick to aerial bombardments and small-scale ground incursions if he can.

As things stand, this conflict bears all the hallmarks of a classic lose-lose scenario, at least in the short run. Netanyahu might calculate that the price of being sucked into a pointless and bloody attack on Gaza was worth paying to

avoid the political harm that would come from doing nothing in the face of enormous public pressure. But the risk-averse and cautious Israeli politicians cannot be comfortable this week. The most Netanyahu can hope for is that when the dust settles the new normal in Gaza looks comfortingly like the old normal, something both Netanyahu and the Israeli public believe they can live with, at least for now. But with everything in the region in flux, that expectation may be unrealistic. In a worst-case scenario, Hamas could emerge from this conflict bloodied and battered, but with much greater political and nationalist clout and credibility throughout Palestinian society, including the West Bank, where the Palestinian Authority has been systematically weakened and looks utterly irrelevant and ineffectual.

Under Netanyahu's leadership, Israel is treading water, both in the Gaza campaign and with regard to the biggest questions it faces about its future. It is postponing the day of reckoning, putting off decisions about the occupied territories and the Palestinians, and pretending everything will somehow be a right. Avoiding the toughest issues, which most Israelis don't want to deal with and about which they share no consensus, may be an excellent strategy for Netanyahu's personal political ambitions. But it is a terrible abrogation of his broader national duties: making the hard and necessary decisions, taking prudent and wise risks, and putting the country's interests above his own political career and fortunes.

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