

Netanyahu's 'fear and strength' election message grips Israelis

Poll shows the sometimes divisive figure remains preferred choice for Tuesday's vote



Donald Trump gave Benjamin Netanyahu an election gift by recognising Israel's claim to sovereignty over the Golan Heights © Getty

Andrew England and Mehul Srivastava in Jerusalem APRIL 8, 2019

Yoni Ben-Harush likens Benjamin Netanyahu to a military officer who always had his back — and insists he is the only politician who can be trusted to lead Israel.

“He managed to give us a sense of security, the feeling he is between us and the people who want to harm us,” the 30-year-old former soldier said. “I’m not a politician, I don’t know what is good or bad for us, but I have the sense that Netanyahu is there for us; between them and us.”

That “us-versus-them” narrative has been at the core of Mr Netanyahu’s rhetoric in a fiercely contested election that has been low on policy and high on drama. One of Israel’s longest serving leaders, he is facing off on Tuesday against his main rival, [Benny Gantz](#), a former military chief of staff who has waged a campaign best summed up as anyone but “Bibi”, the prime minister’s nickname.

At the end of the final week of campaigning — which was marked by allegations of phone tampering, voter manipulation, and pro-Netanyahu Twitter bots — the prime minister’s Likud party was running neck and neck with Mr Gantz’s Blue and White, according to polls. But they suggested that, with the help of other rightwing parties, Mr Netanyahu would still be able to cobble together a governing coalition. One survey last week indicated that he remained Israelis’ [preferred choice](#) as prime minister, particularly among young Jewish voters.

A wily political operator, Mr Netanyahu is often painted as a divisive figure after a decade in power punctuated by controversy. He is seeking a record fifth term at Tuesday’s elections, while facing the threat of an indictment related to corruption allegations. He has also angered liberal

Israelis by aligning with an extremist anti-Arab party in a gamble to improve his chances of forming a rightwing coalition.

Mr Netanyahu's political longevity owes much to his ability to tap into Jewish Israelis' sense of victimhood while projecting a strong, successful state abroad.

Yohanan Plesner, president of the Israel Democracy Institute, said the 69-year-old prime minister had worked out how to play on Israelis' security fears, constantly raising the spectre of a hostile Iran and often referring to the Holocaust.



Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party is running neck and neck with Benny Gantz's Blue and White party © AP

“It [Holocaust] was more than 70 years ago and it's just as present as it was in our discourse in the 50s and 60s. Our idea of reinventing the state was departing from the victim mindset,” he said. But “your ability to articulate to the state of Jewish victimhood is enough for people to identify with you because they say ‘he gets it’. It's very much speaking to the fundamental, underlying Israeli existential fear and not letting it wane.”

Since taking office for a second time in 2009, Mr Netanyahu has steered Israeli politics further to the right and pressed ahead with expanding Jewish settlement in occupied land despite international opprobrium. He has talked tough against the Palestinians as thoughts of resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict have been relegated in political discourse.

The eruption of the second Palestinian intifada and the failure of the Oslo peace accords weakened Israel's political left, while over the past decade the economy has flourished and Israel has enjoyed a period of relative peace. The chaos and conflict triggered by the 2011 Arab uprisings also chimed with Mr Netanyahu's narrative that Israel was surrounded by unstable, hostile neighbours.

Crucially, he has dashed the notion that Israel would face what Ehud Barak, the former Labour prime minister, described as a “diplomatic tsunami” if it failed to secure peace with the Palestinians. Today, many Israelis believe the country's international relations are stronger than

ever, despite the government’s refusing to make any concessions on the occupation of Palestinian territories.

As if to prove the point, Mr Netanyahu was [embraced by Donald Trump](#) in Washington last month, with the US president delivering what many saw as an election gift by recognising Israel’s claims to sovereignty over the occupied Golan Heights. Next up, the premier welcomed President Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil to Jerusalem. Last week, he visited Vladimir Putin in Russia and received another boost after Moscow handed over the remains of an Israeli soldier who went missing in Lebanon in the 1980s.

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“Maybe Netanyahu’s biggest achievement is that he has trashed this [tsunami] theory . . . Many people in Israeli were very fearful: ‘My God, if we don’t

reach a settlement with the Palestinians we are going to be so isolated,’” said Emmanuel Navon, a senior fellow at the Kohelet Policy Forum, an influential rightwing advocacy and research group.

“[Now] people look at the balance sheet and say even if they hate Netanyahu on a personal level, why gamble again?”



Palestinian protesters launch stones during protests near the border between Israel and Gaza Strip. Netanyahu has tapped into voters' fears that Israel is surrounded by hostile neighbours

Haviva, a 64-year-old housewife in Tel Aviv, will not be betting on anybody else when she casts her ballot.

“Which leader, in his time, did what Bibi did? We are talking to the whole world, with international leaders and presidents. He is King!” she said, referring to the prime minister’s childhood nickname.

Still, while Mr Netanyahu’s “us versus them” rhetoric — which he applies indiscriminately to Palestinians and the Israeli left — rallies many in his base, some of his erstwhile supporters believe he has gone too far.

Natan Salem voted for Mr Netanyahu's Likud party in 2015 but this time will cast his ballot for Blue and White.

"I'm disappointed by Netanyahu: he's divided the people, the way he says 'us and them, the right is right, the left are traitors'," Mr Salem, 63, said. "If the people are not together, it makes us less strong."

But Mr Gantz's greatest challenge is to convince voters that he will be a safe pair of hands after a decade dominated by his rival.

"I don't trust him. I don't know how he's going to function," said Mr Ben-Harush, who served under Mr Gantz. "You can be a very good general and a very bad prime minister."

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