

# Netanyahu's Desperate Gamble

by Harley Schlanger

March 25—As crowds have been gathering on the streets of Israel, including in front of the house of Prime Minister Benjamin “Bibi” Netanyahu, to protest against his government, it is legitimate to ask, as some Israeli commentators have begun to do: Which action of his are they protesting? There are protests against his move to fire Shin Bet Director Ronen Bar; his renewed push for judicial reform, which drew hundreds of thousands into the streets before the October 7, 2023 Hamas attack; and breaking the Gaza ceasefire, once again killing Palestinians indiscriminately, before the remaining hostages are freed.

Netanyahu's swift move to fire Bar is related to the other issues. Bar has been under attack for the failure of his security forces to provide advance warning of the Hamas attack. While it is still a matter of conjecture as to who bears responsibility for what all agree was a classic intelligence failure, some of the blame for



Prime Minister of Israel X page  
*Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is gambling on support from U.S. President Donald Trump.*



Presidency of Israel/Amos Ben Gershon  
*Shin Bet chief Ronen Bar, an inconvenient sleuth.*

it falls on Netanyahu, who is being accused of scapegoating Bar to cover for his own failure. There is also the question of why, if Bar and the Shin Bet are to blame, has Netanyahu kept him as a leading advisor since October 7?

Shin Bet agents are pursuing leads related to charges that two of Netanyahu's top aides received money from Qatar for as-of-yet undisclosed purposes—most likely



CC/Ben Cohen

*Israelis protest Prime Minister Netanyahu's indifference to the hostages' fate and his preference for war, near his home in Jerusalem, March 20.*

to polish Qatar's image as a friend of Israel. Netanyahu has bragged in the past about funneling as much as \$1 billion to Hamas through Qatar, to build up Hamas as a rival to the Palestinian Authority, to split the Palestinians to make them easier to contain. Among those addressing the protestors have been Ami Ayalon, the well-respected former director of Shin Bet, and Aharon Barak, the former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, who warned that the country is "heading towards a civil war."

Further roiling a section of the Israeli public is that a session scheduled on March 20 for a meeting between family members of hostages and the security cabinet was postponed, so that the war-cabinet members could hear Netanyahu's case for Bar's firing. This has provoked sharp rebukes from members of the Hostage and Missing Families Forum, who accused the Prime Minister of repeatedly refusing to hear from them. They are also upset that the renewed attacks on Gaza, launched on March 17, endanger the remaining living hostages. At the March 20 session, the cabinet approved the firing of Bar, despite Israel's Attorney General Gali Baharav-Miara saying Netanyahu could not take that step. Netanyahu's cronies responded by moving to oust her as well, thus possibly triggering a constitutional crisis. The Supreme Court stepped in to put a hold on the firings, as tension continues to build.

Adding to the anger directed at Netanyahu is the renewed slaughter of Palestinians in Gaza, after nearly two months of a ceasefire agreement with Hamas. More than 800 are known dead from the first days of the attack, many of them children—on top of the 60 Palestinians killed so far, according to figures from the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), as a result of Operation Iron Wall in the West Bank. This was launched on January 21, two days after the Gaza ceasefire, and has led



CC/Wafa

*Israel agrees to ceasefires so it can have the pleasure of breaking them. It broke the latest ceasefire on March 18 with a mass murder spree killing scores of civilians in Gaza and the flattening of more buildings.*

to the displacement of at least 40,000 Palestinians in the West Bank. It was initiated at the insistence of war-cabinet member Bezalel Smotrich, who has renewed his call for the mass transfer of the Palestinians, as a solution to the "threat" of Palestinian terrorism.



CC/CSIS

*The Atlantic's Jeffrey Goldberg. But who organized this set-up of President Trump?*

"Transfer" is a euphemism for ethnic cleansing, and is a violation of international law. The brutal Israeli treatment of the people of Gaza has already been the subject of a case brought before the International Court of Justice, which is investigating it as a case of genocide.

Lurking ominously in the background is the constant threat from Netanyahu of a full-scale military campaign against Iran, targeting its nuclear program for destruction and its government for "regime change." As the United States was launching air strikes against the Houthis in Yemen, United States National

Security Advisor Mike Waltz threatened on March 23 that Iran had to change its foreign policy and "walk away completely" from its nuclear program, or "there will be consequences." Netanyahu has reportedly been attempting to convince U.S. President Donald Trump's



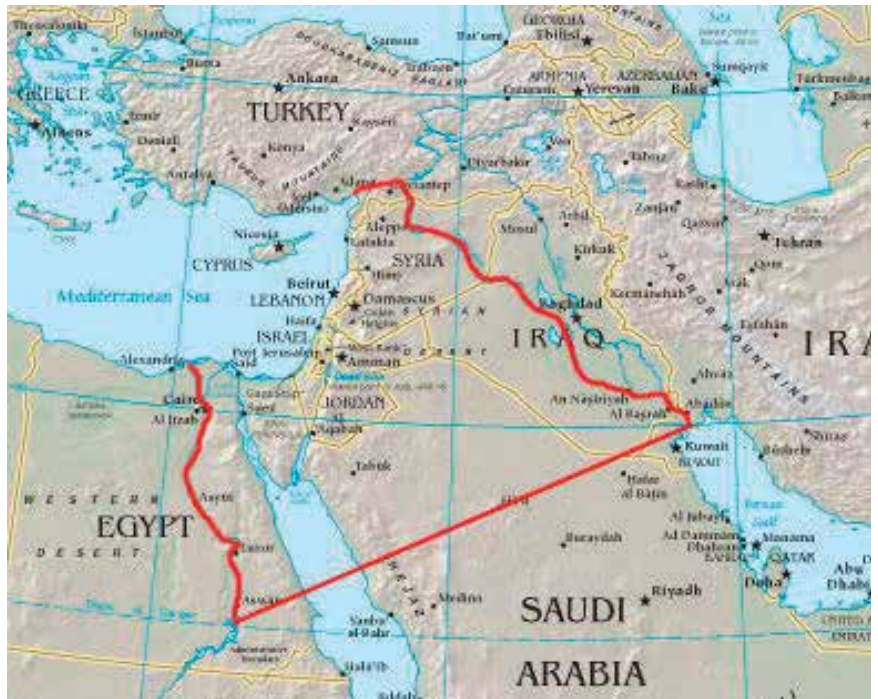
Administration that Iran can be “decapitated” without a full-scale war, the way the IDF did with Hezbollah and the way the Bashar al-Assad government in Syria was toppled. The inclusion of a hostile journalist, Jeffrey Goldberg of *The Atlantic*, on a chat on Signal by the Trump national security team to discuss the attack on Yemen, has been turned into a major scandal by the anti-Trump media, about the alleged failure to protect classified intelligence.

This raises the question of who might be “decapitated” by the escalation against Iran, as immediate U.S. congressional hearings on the affair are targeting the members of Trump’s security and intelligence team—prominently including the Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard and FBI Director Kash Patel—who faced opposition from the war hawks during their confirmation proceedings. Also in the line of fire has been CIA Director John Ratcliffe.

### Support for War Drops in Israel

It has not gone unnoticed by media commentators who had previously been staunch defenders of Netanyahu’s hardline response against the people in Gaza, that the large demonstrations coincide with a loss of support for Bibi in the polls. February polls by the Institute for National Security Studies show a low 21% trust in the government, while Netanyahu’s approval rating has dropped to 27%. These numbers reflect a significant decline in support for Netanyahu, who despite widespread dislike for him, had benefited from his position as a war-time leader, though his support always fell below 50%.

A poll last week reported by Channel 12—a station which strongly supports editorially the Greater Israel stance of Netanyahu—found that 60% now believe Netanyahu should resign, and 73% favor the move to phase two of the ceasefire deal, which has been jettisoned by the renewed attacks in Gaza. An example of the sharp turn against Netanyahu was an op-ed in *Haaretz* by Zvi Bar’el. The Prime Minister, he wrote, “continues to aggressively undermine democracy’s foundations.” Bar’el’s advice to the demonstrators tak-



CC/Remiell at English Wikipedia

A CIA map of “Greater Israel,” from the Euphrates to the Nile.

ing to the streets against the policies of Netanyahu: “Polite protests won’t be enough. This is a war for our existence.” Comments such as these were not common previously in the war-time press.

### Bibi Plays the ‘Trump Card’

Under growing pressure, Netanyahu on March 19 played his Trump card. According to *Haaretz* columnist David Issacharoff, he defended himself as the victim of a network of a “leftist Deep State operation.” Issacharoff wrote, “Benjamin Netanyahu took to X, in English, using desperate and conspiratorial language to push the theory that in both Israel and the United States, ‘when a strong right-wing leader wins an election, the leftist Deep State weaponizes the justice system to thwart the people’s will.’”

In presenting this as a defense, Netanyahu is counting on what has been thus far strong support from U.S. President Trump. Though Trump campaigned as an anti-war candidate, and has begun a “normalization” of relations with Russia to end the war in Ukraine, he has continued to express support for Netanyahu. In addition to saying that Netanyahu should “get it done,” referring to Bibi saying he would obliterate Hamas, Trump’s comments that he (Trump) would take over Gaza and move all the Palestinians to Egypt or Jordan,

were cheered by Netanyahu's base, which favors the removal of Palestinians to allow for the settlement of "Greater Israel." The Trump administration also expedited increased military and financial support to Netanyahu, with Secretary of State Marco Rubio announcing rapid allocation of a \$4 billion aid package.

But Netanyahu is taking a risk in assuming that Trump will defend him. On March 20, Trump seemed to reverse himself on removing the Palestinians from Gaza, commenting, "Nobody is expelling any Palestinians." There are also con-

flicting signals coming from Trump on Iran, as he mentioned the possibility of a new nuclear deal with the Iranians, knowing that Netanyahu expects full back-up from the U.S when he decides to attack Iran.

And Trump's Mideast emissary, Steve Witkoff, who reportedly leaned heavily on Netanyahu to get him to sign on to the January ceasefire agreement, suggested that the Trump administration finds the Egyptian plan for rebuilding Gaza "to have some merit," after it was rejected by Netanyahu.

A number of Israeli commentators have warned Netanyahu that he should note that Trump seemed to be all for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, until he decided to drop him. They are reporting that while the "Christian Zionists" among the MAGA faithful, who are allied with neocon war hawks in both parties in the Congress, are applauding Trump's support for Netanyahu, there is also a strong current of "America First" opposing any support for a new war in Southwest Asia. They are writing that the real test will be whether Trump will back Netanyahu if he moves against Iran.

Prominent Trump supporters are speaking against support for Netanyahu, including criticizing the threats for war with Iran and the bombing attacks in Yemen. Tucker Carlson, for example, said that Trump's Israel policy contradicts his "America First" message.

Carlson reminded viewers of Trump's criticism of former U.S. President Joe Biden's decision to launch strikes against Yemen last Summer, when he said on Tim Poole's podcast, "Recently, they're dropping



Tucker Carlson's Facebook page

*Talk show host Tucker Carlson, like many other Trump supporters, says that Trump's "Israel First" policy contradicts his "America First" message.*

bombs all over Yemen. You don't have to do that." Also speaking out is Trump stalwart Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA), who said that "not a single American wants another Mideast war," and Rep. Thomas Massie (R-KY), who said, "We're being conditioned to forget everything we learned from Iraq and Afghanistan. These are not our wars."

## **Brits Target U.S.-Russia Normalization**

The decision to dispatch the USS *Carl Vinson* carrier strike group to the region, at a time when leaks of "war plans"

have been made public, is distracting attention away from the importance of his commendable policy of normalization with Russia, and ending the proxy war in Ukraine. In comments made during her weekly *Live Dialogue* webcast, the Schiller Institute's Helga Zepp-LaRouche warned that "If there would be such a U.S., maybe Israeli-U.S. attack on Iran, then that would completely ruin the steps taken in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, where certain positive signs have been made that the conflict around the Black Sea can be settled peacefully, and Ukrainians, Russians, and Americans seem to be making little steps toward progress. But I can only voice my utmost alarm about what is going on in the Middle East. We're sitting on a complete powder keg, and this is really extremely dangerous, because one more little incident, like some terrorist attack, some Reichstag Fire kind of event, and we could, indeed, have an escalation of no return."

And who would favor such an escalation? Zepp-LaRouche spoke of the frenzied efforts of the Europeans, led by the British, for a military buildup against Russia, as they are stoking the flames against Russia's ally, Iran. The escalation she is speaking of would be a regional war, even a nuclear World War III. The pro-war faction is counting on a desperate Netanyahu to bring the U.S. into a war against Iran, playing on his belief that being in a war is what has saved him so far, especially when combined with what has been strong support from President Trump. He is gambling that this will not change. It may be his last gamble.