

Analysis Netanyahu Declares War on Israel's Police and Will Stop at Nothing to Smear Them

While Benjamin Netanyahu ratcheted up the rhetoric this week in an effort to impugn all those involved in investigating him, Labor leader Avi Gabbay garnered his own fair share of juicy headlines.

The first shots in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's war against the Israel Police - who are vigorously and thoroughly investigating the serious suspicions against him - were fired about a year ago. Senior officials in the police tell of vague messages, tendentious rumors and posts on social media that were written by lesser-known Netanyahu supporters.

At the time, MK David Amsalem (Likud) began working on his anti-police legislative initiatives: restricting budgetary independence; mass polygraph tests for officers; and a proposal dubbed the "French law," which would prohibit the investigation of an incumbent prime minister. These looked random and temporary at the time, and not much importance was attributed to them. The fingerprints of the Prime Minister's Office and prime minister's residence were not in evidence.

But everything changed last week, of course, when Netanyahu himself removed the mask from his face and attacked Police Commissioner Roni Alsheich for a "tsunami" of leaks, which never existed and certainly wasn't proven. Suddenly, the threads were connected, the picture became clear, missing pieces were added to the puzzle. The police top brass are convinced that Netanyahu has decided to destroy their organization, to delegitimize them by slandering the commissioner and others, before the conclusion of the investigations against him and the transfer of his file to the State Prosecutor's Office.

The proven and most effective way to destroy the credibility of a man in uniform is to attribute political intentions to him. For that purpose, on the eve of the Sukkot holiday, there was a report on a news website that's close to the prime minister to the effect that Alsheich is planning to run for the chairmanship of Habayit Hayehudi. That is unfounded and unrealistic, if only because of the

cooling-off period required by law to do that. But who bothers with petty details nowadays?

The Knesset winter session, which opens Monday, will be conducted in the shadow of the mudslinging by the prime minister's associates against the organization that is collecting the evidence against him. The mudslinging - at which the group of young people who are friends of his son Yair are experts - won't be restricted to issues related to the investigations. Every mistake and screw-up by the police will serve as an acceptable reason for the slander.

It started this week. An incident in which a policeman threatened ultra-Orthodox demonstrators with his pistol was followed up by Yonatan Orich, who is Netanyahu's Facebook editor. "If it develops into a media crisis for the police, it's liable to deteriorate tomorrow into another leak from the investigations," he tweeted on his personal Twitter account.

The infamous affair of the installation of metal detectors at the entrances to the Temple Mount after the terror attack there in July also became a tool in the hands of Netanyahu and his associates in the war against the men in blue. The PMO leaked that it was the police who recommended and pushed for the installation of the detectors there.

After the fact, it turned out that just the opposite was true: The police had had reservations. What seemed at the time like a typical incident of evading responsibility and passing the hot potato from hand to hand, from the Shin Bet security service to the police and back, was already then understood by senior police officials as part of Netanyahu's plot to make the public become disgusted by Alsheich and his forces.

Anyone who hears the top brass of the Israel Police privately discussing Netanyahu and the minister responsible for them, Gilad Erdan, is horrified. To the former they attribute the characteristics and behavior of a professional criminal. To the latter, they attribute political alliances and social connections with Likud activists - some of them dubious characters who were embroiled in legal problems in the past. For now, it makes no difference whether or not the claims are true; the fact that they exist presents a very problematic picture of the situation on the seam line between the police and political leadership.

To his detriment, Public Security Minister Erdan is caught in the middle of all

this. It's no wonder he's looking for a way out: the Israeli Embassy in Washington; the United Nations - anywhere as long as he can escape the hornets' nest that threatens to destroy his political career.

Erdan is stuck between a rock and a hard place, between the police and the PMO. Netanyahu's associates, both family and professional, consider him a traitor - because of Kan, the public broadcasting corporation that Erdan established under their noses when he served as communications minister, and because he didn't prevent, torpedo or use the power (that he doesn't really even have) to stop the investigations against Netanyahu.

Now even the police are suspicious of him. They believe Erdan is in cahoots, at least partially, with their persecutor, MK Amsalem. That may not be true: Erdan is neither corrupt nor a crook; far from it. But for him, nothing good will come of this saga.

In the coming months, he will turn into the tragic hero of the conflict. The stronger the attacks by the prime minister and his cronies - and they will intensify - the stronger the demand of Erdan that he stand behind his subordinates and protect them from those who are plotting against them and slandering them. If his behavior is statesmanlike, the rift that already exists between him and the premier will grow. Already now, and for quite some time, they rarely communicate, except when circumstances force them to do so.

Taking a right turn

Avi Gabbay, chairman of the Labor Party and Zionist Union, left behind quite a collection of juicy headlines this week before flying to some conference in Rome on Thursday. For days they talked about him, analyzed his intentions, interpreted him and speculated about him. The media has decided he's interesting, that he deserves screen time. For someone who was an unknown quantity to most of the public until a few months ago, that's an achievement.

On Monday night, Channel 2 TV News opened with a sensational item, although it was actually nothing new: Gabbay believes we aren't necessarily obligated to evacuate isolated political settlements when there's a peace agreement. The story completely upstaged a large Yesh Atid convention, at which party chairman Yair Lapid delivered an uncharacteristically belligerent and meaty speech. The next day in the media, it was only Gabbay-Gabbay-Gabbay, and no sign of Lapid. If

there is a paradise for politicians, it can be found in such small pleasures: raining on your rival's parade.

The adventures of Gabbay began last Saturday, when he announced he would not invite the predominantly Arab Joint List to join any future government. On another occasion, he said he is not sure there is a Palestinian partner on the other side, at present. He said he doesn't expect Netanyahu to resign as a result of the investigations. And, of course, there was that statement about the settlements, which placed him at the heart of the right, between Habayit Hayehudi chairman Naftali Bennett and Netanyahu, and so on.

Given the intensity and quantity of these minor scandals, the Labor leader emerged relatively unscathed. On the hard left they grumbled, they were insulted, they whined. But they didn't attack, didn't humiliate and didn't eulogize (with the exception of a few predictable commentaries). Had his predecessor, Isaac Herzog, made similar pronouncements, with the same frequency, his party colleagues would have skinned him alive.

When Herzog suggested three years ago that the Palestinian state solution wasn't relevant at the time, he was attacked by his colleagues, most notably Shelly Yacimovich: She ran over him twice and then confirmed the kill. That same Yacimovich delivered glowing and fiery speeches this week in favor of her ally, Gabbay. She didn't accuse him of "betraying the values of the Labor movement," as she said of his predecessor, but instead credited him with supreme adherence to them. Ultimately, everything is personal, as Don Corleone taught us.

Herzog publicly supported Gabbay's policy. At the time, he also tried to woo the right-wing electorate, in the knowledge that there is no government on the left, only the sands of the opposition desert.

"The idea of leaving settlements in the territory of the Palestinian state is not new," Herzog said this week. "I personally discussed it with [Palestinian President] Abu Mazen [aka Mahmoud Abbas] in 2014. He didn't reject the idea."

Amir Peretz, who lost to Gabbay in the Labor primary in July, was uncharacteristically silent. He realizes this isn't the time to quarrel with the elected chairman. Tzipi Livni, the partner in Zionist Union from the Hatnuah party, published a tough condemnation of the statements (in her case, it really is ideological - after all, she's a converted Likudnik), but she didn't embark on a

campaign against the new leader.

Livni feels somewhat neglected since Gabbay assumed the Zionist Union reins. The new broom doesn't bother to consult or coordinate every message and every speech with her, as Herzog was careful to do. Gabbay's approach is totally managerial: An organization doesn't have two CEOs. The two spoke by phone immediately after the television interview, a conversation that wasn't easy, and met in private on Wednesday. Gabbay says everything is fine between them and didn't sound particularly troubled.

The past week proves that Gabbay is prepared to gamble - big-time. Some of his recent comments may have been random in terms of their timing, but not in terms of the path he has chosen to follow. As opposed to Lapid, who was a typical Tel Aviv leftist until he experienced a rude political awakening, Gabbay comes from a Likud home. He voted Likud and, together with Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon, started a center-right party called Kulanu. He never pretended to be anyone else. He was elected, unexpectedly, by a majority of Labor Party members, just because he is someone else.

His gestures to the right look more credible and less opportunistic. Not only in political terms. Gabbay also decided to speak "Jewish" to his voters. He visited the Western Wall, invited an ultra-Orthodox rabbi to a party convention on the eve of Rosh Hashanah - and there's more of that to come.

"Twenty years ago, Netanyahu said of us: 'On the left they've forgotten what it means to be Jews,'" he said this week. "Since then, the left has invested all its energy in proving that he's right. We sanctified liberal values and neglected Jewish values. Nu, so at our convention on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, a rabbi came and taught a few words of Torah. So what?"

Some people in his party are allergic to this kind of talk. One day we'll find him kissing a rabbi's beard, said someone. He was referring to the legendary event at which the late Itzchak Mordechai, who was chairman of the Center Party, came to greet Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the spiritual leader of Shas, at the height of the 1999 election campaign. He caressed the rabbi's gray beard and placed his fingers on the rabbi's lips with great respect. This act aroused horror among many of the party's supporters and sent them to One Israel, headed by Ehud Barak, and to Tommy Lapid's Shinui party. The Center Party began to plummet in the polls,

from 20 anticipated seats to six. Mordechai, who wanted to be prime minister, ended up as transportation minister with the bitter taste of a beard in his mouth.

Winter is coming

Netanyahu is set to announce his choice for the position of military secretary soon. According to the age-old custom in the Israel Defense Forces, when the time comes for change, the chief of staff presents a host of candidates to the prime minister, who is obliged to pick one of them. If he doesn't find any candidate suitable, he will ask the chief of staff to offer an alternative list. In any case, the chief of staff - to whom the military secretary remains subordinate, even while he's serving in the PMO - is the one who makes the recommendations

A few weeks ago, IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eisenkot gave Netanyahu the names of three brigadier generals, all of them admired division heads: Yehuda Fuchs (Gaza Division), Yaniv Asor (Golan Division) and Uri Gordin (the Fire Formation, a reserve paratrooper division). As of today, Netanyahu has yet to decide. So far, this item should fall under the responsibility of our military correspondent - so what brings it down to the depths of a political column?

The reason is Netanyahu's preferred candidate: Brig. Gen. Ofer Winter, head of IDF Central Command. It's customary to call him: "Our friend, Ofer Winter." This officer has been involved in a series of scandals in recent years: the "commander's letter," boasting the messianic-fanatical text he sent to his fighters on the Gaza border during 2014's Operation Protective Edge; his grave and inappropriate behavior in the affair of sexual harassment in his unit; and the information he secretly sent, in contravention of army orders, to a politician who is also his good friend - Education Minister Naftali Bennett - during that Gaza war.

Winter used to meet with Bennett, a member of the security cabinet, in the woods and in the minister's car, to update him on what was happening in the field, so that the minister could make proper use of the information in the security meetings.

The fact that, as of this writing, Netanyahu is insisting on our friend Winter is inexplicable. Not necessarily because of the large can of worms that should disqualify the officer from such an important and sensitive position in the center of the security tub in the aquarium that is the PMO. We have already learned that

when it comes to “ethical” issues, Netanyahu is less than meticulous.

The great surprise is that the suspicious and paranoid Netanyahu is willing to appoint alongside him, right up close, a person who has a strong and long-standing friendship with Bennett, Netanyahu’s nemesis. Bennett and Winter have been friends for 20 years, since their military service as young commanders in elite IDF units. This friendship proved itself in those woods and the back seat of the official government car in the summer of 2014, as well as in public statements by Bennett in Winter’s favor on several occasions when the officer was receiving negative press.

Netanyahu is capable of angrily dismissing someone out of hand because of a rumor about a minor past connection to someone who was at odds with him a decade ago. So how come he’s willing to adopt the ally of a present and future rival?

The opinion among the political establishment, whose right wing is particularly interested in this story, is that the solution to the mystery can be found in the residence on Balfour Street, Jerusalem. That’s where the person can be found who is pushing, or pushed, for Winter. Someone said he heard journalist Erel Segal say that Winter will be the prime minister’s next military secretary, but Segal denied this when I asked about it.

As of this week, the prime minister is digging in his heels and the appointment of the military secretary is being delayed. The IDF is waiting, the PMO is waiting, and in Habayit Hayehudi, the party that loves Winter, they are hoping and crossing their fingers - and, of course, praying quite a bit.

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