**Chapter 8**

**Challenging Paradigms: A New Middle East, Palestinians Notwithstanding, and Beyond**

1. **Peace to Prosperity: Economic Gains, Political Concessions**

In the last year of his presidential term, Donald Trump, in Netanyahu’s words “the greatest friend Israel has ever had in the White House,” introduced a comprehensive plan, “Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People.” Strangely enough, there were no Palestinians present when he unveiled the plan at the White House on January 28, 2020, just a few weeks before elections in Israel. It was clearly timed to boost Netanyahu’s campaign, which portrayed him as the only statesman in Israeli politics. He was in “a league of his own” the billboards declared, together with a picture featuring Trump and Netanyahu shaking hands. Was this simply a matter of personal and ideological affinity between the two leaders? How did Netanyahu change the conceptualization of the Middle East and what was his greater vision and plan for the international arena?

The “Peace to Prosperity” plan encompassed two parts: a political framework and an economic framework. When launching the plan, Trump remarked:

On my first trip overseas as President, I visited the Holy Land of Israel. I was deeply moved and amazed by what this small country had achieved in the face of overwhelming odds and never-ending threats. The State of Israel comprises only a miniscule amount of land in the Middle East and yet it has become a thriving center of democracy, innovation, culture, and commerce.

Israel is a light unto the world. The hearts and history of our people are woven together. The Land of Israel is an ancient home, a sacred place of worship, and a solemn promise to the Jewish people that we will never again repeat history’s darkest hour.

[[1]](#footnote-1)

The State of Israel, in Trump’s discourse, is the Holy Land. For Trump, for his evangelical base, and for Orthodox Jews, the Land of Israel is a sacred promise to the Jews. The Palestinians have no part in this narrative, nor do they have much chance of having their position included in the history of “our people” – Americans and Israelis, or Christians and Jews – whose histories are interwoven.

The story of the Arabs (and Muslims) is less compelling to Trump. He noted, however, that he had also met with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in Bethlehem and “was saddened by the fate of the Palestinian people.” Trump continued: “They deserve a far better life. They deserve the chance to achieve their extraordinary potential.” A better life, from his perspective, is to be achieved through economic means. In his analysis, “Palestinians have been trapped in a cycle of terrorism, poverty, and violence exploited by those seeking to use them as pawns to advance terrorism and extremism.” Indeed, terrorism and Islamic extremism were the main concerns of the Trump administration with regard to the Palestinians.

Trump returned to this theme eight months later, on September 15, 2020, at the Abraham Accords signing ceremony. “A vicious cycle of terror and violence,” fueled by “lies passed down from generation to generation,” had held the region back, according to Trump. In particular, he cited “the lies that the Jews and Arabs were enemies and that Al-Aqsa Mosque was under attack.” But the new accords would set history on a “new course,” Trump promised. “The people of the Middle East will no longer allow hatred of Israel to be fomented as an excuse for radicalism or extremism.”[[2]](#footnote-2) The Middle East is described as imbued with radicalism, extremism, and terrorism, and Trump viewed the Palestinians as part of the problem. The United States, the most powerful force for democracy in the world, could hardly be an “honest broker” between Israel and the Palestinians when it saw the latter as disseminators of “lies” and associated them with Islamic terrorism.

The Palestinians’ national narrative, contrary to the narrative embraced by Trump and Netanyahu, is built on ideas of native Arabism in the Middle East, centuries-old Islam, and defiance of occupation. The national story of the Jews triumphed under Trump and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was therefore presented from within a Christian-Judaic tradition that relegated the Palestinians to the sidelines. In this religious, ethno-cultural narrative, a solemn promise was made to one side only; the other side was offered an economic deal.

Thus, the neo-liberal and the neo-conservative ethos was fundamental in Trump’s Middle East policy. In both the United States and Israel, neo-liberalism replaced liberalism, and ethno-religious culture replaced universal rights. What is the connection between the political and economic frameworks in Trump’s “Peace to Prosperity” plan, which was inspired by Netanyahu and carefully formulated by the president’s son-in-law, Jared Kushner, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (an evangelical Christian and Tea Party Republican), and Ambassador David Friedman?

The economic plan, touted as the “deal of the century,” was introduced at the Manama Conference in June 2019. The plan called upon the Gulf states and other donors to invest over $50 billion in the Palestinian territories. It was rejected outright by the Palestinians, who did not even send an official representative to the U.S.-Arab gathering. President Abbas explained: “Only when there is a political solution based on international law and the two-state vision will we welcome all those who wish to help us, whether it be in Manama or anywhere else.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The second, political part of the “Peace to Prosperity” plan was celebrated in Washington seven months later at its official rollout, without the Palestinians present, as noted. The first part of the plan promised rapid economic growth and job creation for the Palestinians by creating a business environment in Palestine “that provides investors with confidence that their assets will be secure by improving property rights, the rule of law, fiscal sustainability, capital markets, and anti-corruption policies.”[[4]](#footnote-5) These classic neo-liberal goals were to be achieved by injecting $50 billion into the Palestinian economy – transformation through economic measures. The Palestinian market would be integrated into global markets, thus increasing its competitiveness by reducing regulatory barriers and investing in infrastructure. The strategy was to build support in the Gulf Arab countries by introducing the economic part of the plan first. This also aligned with Trump’s inclination to solve problems by offering irresistible economic incentives. Former Prime Minister Tony Blair, who had led the Middle East Quartet a decade earlier, started his speech at the Manama conference by reiterating his belief in the two-state solution. He told Kushner: “It is absolutely foolish to believe you can have economics without politics.”[[5]](#footnote-6) Palestinian officials spurned the plan for this very reason: It lacked an acceptable political solution.[[6]](#footnote-7)

Indeed, the economic ship left the port long before the political one, and the Palestinians were not tempted to come on board. Once the political part became known, it was clear that the economic rationale was intended to overshadow the political sacrifice the plan demanded from the Palestinians. Trump acceded to all of Netanyahu’s demands. First, under the agreement of mutual recognition, the State of Palestine would be recognized by Israel as the state of the Palestinians, while the State of Israel would be recognized by the Palestinians as the state of the Jewish people.[[7]](#footnote-8) This was crucial because it encapsulated the prime minister’s effort to pass the controversial legislation, Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People. That is, Netanyahu felt he could not demand that the Palestinians recognize Israel as a Jewish state if Israel’s Jewish character was not enshrined in a basic law. This was one of the major concessions the United States demanded from the Palestinians – that they recognize Israel as a Jewish state, despite the fact that Palestinians comprise over 20% of Israel’s citizenry (not to speak of the millions of Palestinian refugees who insist on the “right of return” to what is now Israel.)

In addition, the plan’s insistence that no Arab or Jew would be uprooted from their home undermined the entire discourse on the illegality of settlements in the occupied territories, which had been a central issue in negotiations since the 1990s. The plan specifically denies this reading of international law by declaring that “withdrawing from territory captured in a defensive war is a historical rarity.”[[8]](#footnote-9) In addition, the plan emphasizes “that the State of Israel has already withdrawn from at least 88% of the territory it captured in 1967,” thereby endorsing the Israeli right-wing position. This stance was summarily rejected by the European Union and the international community, but their opposition went unheeded by the Trump administration. The plan opened the door for Netanyahu to try to change the attitude toward Israel in the larger European community, and especially in the Eastern European nations, as discussed below.

The premise that peace should not demand the uprooting of people from their homes – Jews or Arabs – was indeed the most significant part of the “Peace to Prosperity” plan from the perspective of the occupied territories and the fate of the Palestinian state.[[9]](#footnote-10) According to the plan’s “conceptual map,” borders would be drawn in a manner that “avoids forced population transfers of either Arab or Jews.”[[10]](#footnote-11) The immediate implication was that no Jewish settlement in the territories would be evacuated, thus calling into question the viability of a sovereign and contiguous Palestinian state. The plan also demanded the full demilitarization of Palestine[[11]](#footnote-12) and the implementation of a U.S.-style democracy: Palestine would be required to ratify a constitution and maintain the rule of law, freedom of press, fair elections, etc., and erase any incitement from the textbooks used in Palestinian schools.[[12]](#footnote-13) This was hardly a generous peace offer for an independent Palestinian state. In fact, it reflected a long-standing tactic of Netanyahu. At the height of the Obama administration, just before Netanyahu made his Bar-Ilan speech endorsing the two-state solution, his father, the historian and ideologue Ben-Zion Netanyahu, was interviewed by the journalist Amit Segal. “Does your son support a Palestinian state?” he asked the father. “No, he does not. He supports one on such terms that the Palestinians would never accept,”[[13]](#footnote-14) the historian clarified.

The political framework of the “deal of the century” ruled out any cooperation from the Palestinians. It was a peace plan between the United States and Israel, essentially without the Palestinians. Netanyahu effusively praised the deal and its patron, Trump: “Mr. President, I believe down the decades – and perhaps down the centuries – we will also remember January 28th, 2020 because on this day, you became the first world leader to recognize Israel’s sovereignty over areas in Judea and Samaria that are vital to our security and central to our heritage.”[[14]](#footnote-15) Netanyahu used a double-helixed justification: He argued that all previous peace talks had failed because “they did not strike the right balance between Israel’s vital security and national interests and the Palestinians’ aspirations for self-determination.” The first layer is security: Only Trump recognized that “Israel must have sovereignty in places that enable Israel to defend itself by itself” and accepted all the restrictions Netanyahu’s right-wing government demanded. The other is the ethno-religious layer:

For too long – far too long – the very heart of the Land of Israel where our patriarchs prayed, our prophets preached, and our kings ruled, has been outrageously branded as illegally occupied territory. Well, today, Mr. President, you are puncturing this big lie. You are recognizing Israel’s sovereignty over all the Jewish communities in Judea and Samaria, large and small alike.[[15]](#footnote-16)

The speech began like a policy declaration by a statesman, but morphed into a prophetic statement by the leader of the Jewish people, or rather of the right-wing nationalist camp, who was well aware of the evangelical presence in the American administration and the Republican electorate. Netanyahu continued:

These, as the distinguished pastors who are here know very well — these are places inscribed in the pages of the Bible. These are places carved into the bedrock of our common civilization: the sacred tomb in Hebron where the fathers and mothers of the Jewish people are buried; Bethel, where Jacob dreamed of a ladder ascending to the heavens; Shiloh, where the Ark of the Covenant that held the Ten Commandments … for centuries. That’s what happened in Shiloh.

The only places mentioned are Hebron, Beit El, and Shiloh – all of them familiar as the names of American cities and from Old Testament stories known to religious Christians. As for the Palestinians, Netanyahu asserted that the plan offers a “better life,” “national dignity,” “prosperity,” and “hope.” “It takes enormous talent to reject $50 billion worth of investment,” he haughtily pronounced, anticipating the Palestinian rejection of a plan he characterized as both “a great plan for peace” and “a great plan for Israel.” But Netanyahu stopped short of saying it was a great plan for the Palestinians. Was the unfulfilled plan with the Palestinians the first milestone en route to the peace agreements with the AEU, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan the following year? Netanyahu hoped to change the balance of power in the Middle East in light of the nuclear threat posed by Iran and identified as the main obstacle: the conventional belief that no peace could be achieved in the region without solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict first. This approach of prioritizing an Israeli-Palestinian accord had dictated the attitude of the Western powers towards Israel and the Middle East since the 1990s, despite under-the-radar cooperation between Israelis and the Gulf states for a quarter century.

This is perhaps the greatest achievement of the Trump-Netanyahu “deal of the century”: challenging this paradigm and pushing the Palestinians aside, going forward with moderate Arab states in the region without any real progress on the home front with the Palestinians. On September 3, 2021, Netanyahu, now as the opposition leader, criticized Naftali Bennett’s government: “While we bypassed the Palestinians and brought four historic peace agreements with Arab countries without giving them any presents, any concessions, you are giving the Palestinians free gifts and bringing them back into the heart of the international agenda, a third huge failure.”[[16]](#footnote-17) Thus, in retrospect, Netanyahu described his own achievement as taking the Palestinian conflict off the agenda and marginalizing the Palestinians in the regional and world diplomatic discourse.

Yet from the perspective of his national camp, his base, the greatest prize offered by the Trump-Netanyahu vision was declaring Israel’s sovereignty over all Jewish territories in Judea and Samaria. This declaration of sovereignty, Netanyahu boasted, was the second most important moment in Israel’s history after the Declaration of Independence in 1948. This achievement – U.S. recognition of “Israel’s sovereignty over areas in Judea and Samaria that are vital to our security and central to our heritage,”[[17]](#footnote-18) paving the way for Israeli annexation – was a key part of Netanyahu’s election campaign and was coordinated with the Trump administration.[[18]](#footnote-19) This was his message to the leaders of the settlement movement, some of whom accompanied the prime minister to Washington for the “Peace to Prosperity” ceremony in late January 2020, just a few weeks before the next round of elections in early March.

The euphoria was short-lived, however, and Netanyahu faced backlash after delivering his speech at the ceremony. Trump himself was furious with Netanyahu’s portrayal of him as authorizing annexation.[[19]](#footnote-20) The Americans were unable to dismiss the international pressure to postpone the annexation of the settlements. After the elections, Netanyahu formed a unity government with the Blue-White party, which put the brakes on annexation plans. Defense Minister Benny Gantz and Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi, the leaders of Blue-White, were both left in the dark about the Abraham Accords – phase two of the Trump-Netanyahu “deal of the century.” In these accords, Israel chose normalization over sovereignty: It deferred annexation of the occupied territories, but achieved full normalization with the UAE and Bahrain.[[20]](#footnote-21)

**B. Abraham Accords: Normalization Instead of Annexation**

The Abraham Accords were announced on September 14, 2020, and the signing ceremony took place in Washington, D.C. on January 28, 2021, just two months before the elections that ended Netanyahu’s long tenure as prime minister – a tenure even longer than that of Israel’s founding father, David Ben-Gurion. Trump spoke of “eternal peace” and Netanyahu described the accords as a “peace for peace” deal. The prominent journalist Jeffrey Goldberg described it in less glowing terms as “an arms deal.”[[21]](#footnote-22) In Trump’s view, the Abraham Accords marked a change in the course of history: After decades of conflict, the agreements would bring peace and prosperity to a new Middle East. Yes, he used the expression coined by Shimon Peres, who spoke about a “new Middle East” in the wake of the Oslo Accords, for which he received the Nobel Prize along with Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat. Peres had also linked security and peace with economic prosperity, but his vision was part of the old paradigm: Palestinians first, as the only way to bring peace to the region. Trump and Netanyahu managed to upend the paradigm: first, peace in the region and economic cooperation, with the Palestinians perhaps joining later. The accords, in Trump’s words, provided “the foundation for a comprehensive peace across the entire region,” a peace “founded on shared interests, mutual respect, and friendship.”[[22]](#footnote-23) Economics drives the world, certainly Trump’s world. The partnership between Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain would include “a broad range of sectors, from tourism to trade, and healthcare to security.”

The Abraham Accords openly encouraged economic relations between non-belligerent states that had already been trading with one another under the radar for decades. Moreover, once the paradigm changed, the Palestinian issue was no longer an obstacle to establishing full diplomatic relations. The paradigm change was a result of a compliant Trump administration and the shared interests of Israel and the Gulf states regarding Iran, particularly in light of the hardline stance taken against Iran by Trump. Joining Trump and Netanyahu at the signing ceremony were Abdullah bin Zayed, foreign minister of the UAE, and Foreign Minister Abdullatif al-Zayani of Bahrain. The Israeli foreign minister, Ashkenazi, was not present at the ceremony. Netanyahu kept the international stage for himself and used it to embarrass his own foreign minister in the political skirmishing on the internal Israeli front.

The UAE foreign minister extended a hand for peace and said to Netanyahu: “Thank you for choosing peace and for halting the annexation of the Palestinian territories.” With these words, he clearly confirmed the conditions for the deal: normalization in exchange for halting annexation.[[23]](#footnote-24) He emphasized infrastructure, a stable economy, and scientific achievements, and outlined the UAE’s shared interests with Israel in the fields of technology. This was no longer an armistice with poor and unstable Arab countries like Egypt and Jordan; it was an economic treaty between ambitious and advanced regional powers seeking to maximize their mutual gains. Bahrain’s foreign minister spoke in the same spirit about offering the younger generations “security and prosperity across the region” instead of conflict and mistrust. Yet, he stressed time and again that peace could be achieved only by protecting the rights and interests of countries and peoples in the region.[[24]](#footnote-25) The foreign minister described the two-state solution for the Palestinians as the bedrock for lasting peace in the region. The “Peace to Prosperity” plan did indeed present a blueprint for a two-state solution, but the concessions it demanded from the Palestinians made it a non-starter from the Palestinians’ perspective. The Abraham Accords offered Israel peace with the UAE and Bahrain in exchange for no annexation, and ostensibly conditioned future progress on advancing the two-state solution for the Palestinians. Yet this was too little, too late. The deed was done. Following the peace accords with the two Gulf countries, Israel signed agreements with Sudan and Morocco, without making any progress on the Palestinian front. Thus, the Palestinians were further isolated and marginalized in the regional and international arena under Trump’s administration. Full economic and diplomatic relationships were established between Israel and four Arab countries – the UAE, Bahrain (Saudi Arabia’s proxy), Morocco, and Sudan. Trump and Netanyahu promised that other Arab states were soon to follow.

Back in Israel, Netanyahu defended the Abraham Accords at the Knesset, describing the agreements as a victory for the “peace for peace” doctrine he had laid out 25 years earlier in *A Place Among the Nations: Israel and the World*. According to this doctrine, a strong Israel is a guarantee for a different kind of peace – a peace based on power, not weakness.[[25]](#footnote-26) You make peace from a position of strength, he insisted. Economic power leads to military power, which leads to political power. Already in his book, Netanyahu saw a market economy as the foundation for a strong state.

Isolating Iran and sidelining the Palestinians were Netanyahu’s two long-standing goals. Netanyahu saw the Abraham Accords as solidifying the anti-Iran front by establishing “entirely different relations with the states in the region and outside it.”[[26]](#footnote-27) The right-wing commentator Amir Segal, who has logged hundreds of hours of interviews with Netanyahu, described him as “a formidable ideologue” who “has a mega-goal, and that is to strangle the Palestinian idea.”[[27]](#footnote-28) The Abraham Accords tightened the stranglehold, at least for the time being. There would be warm peace between Israel and the Gulf states, Netanyahu promised, because it would be based on economic opportunities and investment from within the region. Peace for peace.

But was it indeed just “peace for peace”? The United States has always rewarded Arab countries that agree to normalize relations with Israel. In the case of Sudan, Trump tweeted four days before the agreement that the United States would remove Sudan from its list of states that sponsor terrorism. Trump rewarded Morocco by becoming the only world leader willing to recognize Moroccan sovereignty in Western Sahara. In both cases, the United States delivered the goods, but Netanyahu’s influence in the White House played a key role. Most acutely, the United States negotiated the sale of F-35 combat planes to the UAE. Israel had previously been the sole recipient of the advanced aircraft as part of the American commitment to maintain Israel’s qualitative edge over all Arab nations. This was a major concession by Netanyahu, who first denied the deal and then said he knew nothing about it.[[28]](#footnote-31) Gantz made numerous visits to the United States to secure Israeli supremacy by other means, which Netanyahu did not plan on.[[29]](#footnote-32) But the F-35 deal can also be viewed as reflecting a different approach to the region: The moderate Gulf states and Israel face a common enemy – Iran – and the UAE is in fact a forward base for confronting Iranian aggression. It is indeed true that peace is made between enemies, and while Israel was never formally at war with the UAE or Bahrain, yet there is no doubt that military cooperation against Iran, especially an Iran with nuclear capabilities, opened a new strategy for the region once the Palestinian issue was set aside. Furthermore, given the American policy of “no boots on the ground,” shared by Trump and Biden alike, Israel, in Middle Eastern eyes, became the foremost regional power in the fight against Iran. While military cooperation was played down in the ceremonies, Trump’s secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, had already declared at the Warsaw Conference for Peace and Security in the Middle East in 2019 that “you can’t achieve peace and stability in the Middle East without confronting Iran. It’s just not possible. They’re a malign influence in Lebanon, in Yemen, in Syria, in Iraq; the three H’s: the Houthis, Hamas and Hezbollah. These are real threats; there are others as well. But you can’t get peace in the Middle East without pushing back against Iran.’’[[30]](#footnote-33) Palestinians were out, Iran was in. The Abraham Accords were a byproduct of the changing threats and alliances among the regional powers.

1. **Alliance of National Populists: Resetting the European Scene**

The Warsaw conference on the Iranian threat to the Middle East was held on February 3, 2019, with Netanyahu participating alongside representatives from Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Bahrain. Besides its implications for the Middle East, the conference marked the fruition of a diplomatic campaign to break the unanimous denunciation of Israel in Europe and the UN. Since 2006, Israel’s Foreign Ministry had been cultivating an alliance with Eastern European nations that shared a similar nationalist approach to democracy – primarily the Visegrád states: Poland, Hungry, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia.[[31]](#footnote-34) The Netanyahu-Trump relationship was translated into real dividends for other countries, especially those sharing the same ideological hue; this strengthened Netanyahu’s role in the region and beyond. Most notable was Netanyahu’s relationship with Viktor Orbán of Hungary, the long-serving and semi-authoritarian prime minister who curtailed freedom of press, limited judicial independence, and undermined multiparty democracy. Under Orbán, Hungary effectively turned into a one-party state.[[32]](#footnote-35)

The shared interest of Netanyahu and Orbán was primarily about a common worldview and less about economics. Neo-conservatism, or rather populist nationalism, became the crucial link. Orbán and likeminded Eastern European leaders blamed the EU diktat of open borders and the human rights discourse for unleashing waves of Muslim migrants, particularly in the wake of the civil war in Syria. Israel, in Netanyahu’s eyes, also suffered from the misguided approach of the international community (led by Western European countries). For example, Israel was repeatedly condemned for its actions in the occupied territories, notoriously by the UN Commission on Human Rights, while no such admonition was leveled against such major violators of human rights as Syria, Iran, and China.[[33]](#footnote-36) Netanyahu and Orbán both rejected the discourse of universal rights, as well as the multicultural, secular ethos that prevailed in Western Europe. In Poland, Hungry, Slovakia, and Israel, the right-wing leaders stressed ethno-religious nationalism, cultural purity, and rejection of the international human rights dictum that violated their national sovereignty.

Viktor Orbán accused liberal democracy of encroaching on the traditional family and nation.[[34]](#footnote-37) He introduced his illiberal vision of democracy, which prioritizes the national interest and security as a way to halt Muslim immigration, but also to justify restraining the free press, the judiciary, and the NGOs in Hungary. Like Netanyahu, he evolved from leading a liberal party during his first term to shaping a nationalist party in order to gain control of the masses in later years. Entering his fourth term in office, he declared: “We have replaced a shipwrecked liberal democracy with a 21st-century Christian democracy, which guarantees people’s freedom and security.”[[35]](#footnote-39) For him, freedom meant the Hungarian people’s freedom, not the freedom of individuals, as in the liberal model. This was cast in populist nationalist terminology, akin to how Trump and Netanyahu spoke in their home countries: “I am convinced that in Brussels and other capitols in Europe, the political and intellectual elites are at war with the majority of people who still adhere to patriotism and common sense.”[[36]](#footnote-40) It was the leader of the people against the political and intellectual elites, the patriots against the globalist human rights defenders. Gadi Taub, a pro-Netanyahu writer, succinctly expressed the deep-state, populist thesis shared by Trump, Netanyahu, and Orbán in the title of his book *Global Elites and National Citizens: The Attack of the Upper Classes on Israel’s Democracy*.[[37]](#footnote-41) The extreme right always depicts a struggle in which it is simultaneously the victim and the powerful side. Note that the “upper classes” were attacking the people’s democracy, while the popular leader was the defender of the nation and religion. Whether it was a Christian democracy (Orbán) or a Jewish state (Netanyahu), collective identities clashed with individual rights and the egalitarian state of liberal democrats.

After becoming the first Israeli prime minister to visit Budapest, Netanyahu welcomed Orbán to Jerusalem on a reciprocal state visit. He noted that Herzl was born in Hungary, and thus declared that Zionism had its roots in Budapest. Netanyahu also commented on Orbán’s restoration of the synagogues in his country in order to dispel accusations that the authoritarian leader was anti-Semitic. Then Netanyahu got to the core of the shared interest:

We both understand that the threat of radical Islam is a real one. It could endanger Europe, It could endanger the world. It certainly endangers us and our Arab neighbors. We believe that of all the sources of militant Islam, Iran is the greatest threat to our common civilization. And by being here, in this county here, at the frontline of the battle against radical Islam, in many ways Israel is defending Europe.

I want to thank you for defending Israel. You have stood up for Israel time and time again in international forums. It is deeply appreciated and it is important, and important goal of Israeli foreign policy to change not only our bilateral relations with so many countries and indeed our relations are flourishing as never before. It is also to change the way Israel is treated in international forums and on this Hungary has led the charge many, many times and I thank you for it.[[38]](#footnote-42)

Thus, Israel was defending Europe in the common struggle against radical Islam, with Netanyahu portraying himself as the savior of the West. Orbán used the same line of argument: Netanyahu’s fence on the border with Egypt against infiltrators was his inspiration, and in erecting the wall to block the Syrian refugees, Orbán had “defended Europe.” The wave of Muslim masses, while supported by the intellectual elites, was being stopped by the great leaders, defenders of the nation and Western civilization. Indeed, Orbán rode to power by agitating against migrants, associating refugees with terrorism and extremism, and stirring up apprehension about radical Islam.[[39]](#footnote-43) Both Netanyahu and Orbán described the battle as “us” – ethno-religious Christian Hungarians’ in Orbán’s case and the Jewish nation in Netanyahu’s case – against “them,” the refugees, the ultimate foreigners. This was also used to delegitimize human rights discourse, the NGOs seeking to promote civil rights, and the bureaucrats and leftists who work against their own people.

Both leaders sought a face to personalize their battle against the “global elites.” They found it in George Soros, a Hungarian Jew and patron of civil rights NGOs, and launched what was in fact, an anti-Semitic campaign against him. Soros was framed by Orbán’s campaign as the “true ruler,” using his fortune to control the EU. Netanyahu was involved in this in several crucial ways. First, he introduced Orbán to the Jewish-American political consultant Arthur Finkelstein, who advised Orbán to launch this intolerant campaign. The main person behind the campaign was another Jewish-American political consultant, George Birnbaum. (The Finkelstein-Birnbaum team had advised Netanyahu in his successful election campaign in 1996 and Birnbaum again played a key role in Netanyahu’s campaign in 1998.[[40]](#footnote-44)) But that was not all. Netanyahu’s role climaxed when Israeli Ambassador Yossi Amrani issued a statement – at the request of the leadership of the Hungarian Jewish community – urging Orbán to drop the anti-Semitic campaign against Soros. To the amazement of the local Jewish community, and liberals of all political walks of life, Netanyahu ordered the ambassador to retract the statement and issued his own “clarification,” stating that the ambassador’s statement was “in no way meant to delegitimize criticism of George Soros, who continuously undermines Israel’s democratically elected governments by funding organizations that defame the Jewish state and seek to deny it the right to defend itself.”[[41]](#footnote-45)

As part of their campaign against civil rights organizations in Israel, the Netanyahu family engaged in a vicious campaign against the Jewish philanthropist, who contributed to hundreds of such organizations. Yair Netanyahu, a dominant figure in his father’s campaign, tweeted an anti-Semitic caricature showing Soros using his money to manipulate Ehud Barak, who defeated Netanyahu in 1999. David Duke, former head of the KKK and a Holocaust denier, tweeted that the son of the Israeli prime minister had suggested that Soros controls the world through his mammon. Isaac Herzog, then the head of the opposition as the leader of the Labor Party and today Israel’s president, reacted with disgust, saying that “every Jew should be horrified and filled with shame that a *Der Stürmer*-style caricature came from the home of the Israeli prime minister and was endorsed by the greatest anti-Semite. Erase, apologize, and condemn.”[[42]](#footnote-46) Needless to say Netanyahu did not erase, apologize, or condemn.



Orbán’s campaign had all of the usual anti-Semitic components: Jews are after money, they run the world, they threaten Christian nations, and they are identified with the communist left. Indeed, Netanyahu cooperated with Hungarian and Polish right-wing leaders who used anti-Semitism to gain and remain in power. Both Orbán and Netanyahu emphasized the threat of refugees to delegitimize the human rights discourse, civil rights organizations, and liberal democracy at large.[[43]](#footnote-47) Netanyahu was not a passive spectator in the assault against human rights, liberalism, and equality; he was a leader among the populist-nationalist heads of state who viewed themselves as champions of what Orbán called “illiberal democracies.” Democracy for them did not mean protecting individual citizens and their rights, but rather the popular choice of the people, the collective. These right-wing leaders saw themselves as defenders of their nation and culture, not of liberal values, which were identified with “the bureaucratic elites.” It was a classic deep-state argument, which united Trump, Netanyahu, and Orbán, ideologically and politically.[[44]](#footnote-48) As one senior Hungarian official noted: Netanyahu and Orbán “belong to the same political family.”[[45]](#footnote-49) Indeed, Orbán’s party and the Likud saw themselves as sister parties. Once a national-liberal party, the Likud under Netanyahu was now a populist-nationalist party with an anti-liberal vision. Liberalism was designated as the enemy. Even neo-liberalism was curtailed. In his speech in Budapest, which was leaked to the press, Netanyahu told Orbán: “From our experience – protect your borders. I am for an open economy, for bringing goods from any place, but not people. We have blocked the border with Egypt.”[[46]](#footnote-50) Even their neo-liberalism, a pale vestige of political liberalism, was jettisoned in the name of the nation.

Playing with anti-Semitic fire was not a one-time incident with Netanyahu. Far-right ideology, including conservative parties that appeal to the extreme end of the ideological spectrum in populist attempts to win hearts and votes, are usually both anti-Islamic and anti-Semitic. Netanyahu knowingly exploited Islamophobia as he drew closer to the illiberal leaders of the international community. Some called it simply realpolitik.[[47]](#footnote-51) Others were more critical. The historian Zeev Sternhell, for example, described Israel’s meeting with the Visegrád states as “the natural culmination of the efforts of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to integrate his country into the nationalist, racist, and anti-Semitic Eastern European bloc that is the enemy of the liberal West.”[[48]](#footnote-52) The history of the 20th century shows that wherever a discourse of nationalism, anti-liberalism, and xenophobia thrived, the Jews suffered. The fate of the Jews is tied to the liberal, Enlightenment values that the radical right opposes – and this includes Trump, Orbán, and Poland’s Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki.

Netanyahu faced a difficult challenge in demarcating the lines between Islamophobia, anti-Jewishness, and anti-Semitism while attempting to change the map of international allies based on a shared xenophobic, extreme-right ideology. This was also apparent in Netanyahu’s relations with Morawiecki. Here too, as in the case of Orbán, Netanyahu’s internal politics led him to adopt a stance that ignored the advice of experts and weakened the united front against anti-Semitism. On the eve of International Holocaust Remembrance Day in late January 2018, the Polish prime minister pushed through the so-called Holocaust Law, which makes it a criminal offense, subject to imprisonment of up to three years, for anyone to accuse Poland of complicity in Nazi crimes against humanity. Netanyahu publicly declared that history cannot be changed and that Holocaust denial would not be permitted. [[49]](#footnote-53) Israel and Poland, attempting to resolve the crisis, established a joint committee to discuss the matter, but the Polish Senate and president signed the law before the committee issued any recommendations. In June 2018, the committee reached an agreement: The law would be amended to remove the threat of criminal prosecution and imprisonment. Netanyahu and Morawiecki signed a joint declaration emphasizing Israeli-Polish cooperation in the international arena.[[50]](#footnote-54) This was a major achievement from Netanyahu’s perspective; he needed the Visegrád forum and Poland to denounce EU policies toward Israel and the Palestinian issue.

Criticism leveled against this joint Israeli-Polish statement focused on three major problems. First, there is ample historical evidence that many Poles willingly cooperated with the Nazis. The third section of the statement indeed admits that some Poles collaborated with the Nazis, but emphasizes that “numerous” Poles acted heroically: “We acknowledge and condemn every single case of cruelty against Jews perpetrated by Poles during WWII. We are honored to remember heroic acts of numerous Poles, especially the Righteous Among the Nations, who risked their lives to save Jewish people.” In reality, of course, the willing collaborators greatly outnumbered the “Righteous Among the Nations.” The second problem with the Netanyahu-Morawiecki statement was its comparison of the Holocaust to “anti-Polonism.” In section 6 of the statement, two consecutive sentences suggest an equivalence between the two: “Both governments vehemently condemn all forms of anti-Semitism and express their commitment to oppose any of its manifestations. Both governments also express their rejection of anti-Polonism and other negative national stereotypes.” It is inconceivable that the atrocities of the Holocaust and “anti-Polonism” were denounced as comparable crimes against humanity. Third, the joint statement heralded a partnership between Israel and one of the most extreme populist – and anti-Semitic – governments in the EU; the Israeli prime minister actively chose sides against the Western liberal European states and aligned himself with the radical authoritarian regimes of Eastern Europe. This was precisely what Netanyahu wanted – for those anti-liberal states to break down the EU’s unanimous anti-Israeli vote. But the price he was willing to pay was devastating from the perspective of the struggle against anti-Semitism and the spread of anti-liberal values in Israel and the world.

The crisis between Poland and Israel was temporarily resolved, and Poland hosted an international conference on peace and security in the Middle East. But then a furor arose over a remark Netanyahu made, in Hebrew, during a visit to Poland. Speaking at press conference, Netanyahu said: “The Poles cooperated with the Nazis. I don’t see anyone who can deny that.”[[51]](#footnote-55) There was an effort to calm the storm by claiming that the prime minister had been mistranslated and that his Hebrew remark referred to “Poles” and not “the Poles;” that is, he was referring to some individual Poles but not to all Poles. Morawiecki cancelled a planned trip to Jerusalem with other Visegrád leaders. The crisis deepened further when another Polish law was enacted that effectively prevents Jewish heirs of property seized by the Nazis from reclaiming it.[[52]](#footnote-56) Yair Lapid, the foreign minister in the government that unseated Netanyahu, unequivocally denounced this law as anti-Semitic and immoral. (Lapid is the son of a Hungarian Holocaust survivor.) Netanyahu’s close alliance with Eastern European authoritarian leaders began to crumble. “If the Israeli government continues to attack Poland in this way, it will have a very negative impact on our relations – both bilateral and those in the international arena,” Morawiecki warned.[[53]](#footnote-57)

1. **Jerusalem, Armageddon and the Evangelical Alliance: Visions and Revisions in the International Scene**

Netanyahu tried to use Islamophobia and anti-immigration sentiment to change the balance of power within the EU, create a united front against the leading liberal forces of Europe, and gain support for Israel. His bridge to Latin America, however, was of a different kind.

1. Bolsonaro and the Evangelical Connection

In a meeting with evangelicals in Brazil, Netanyahu said: “There is no better friend of Israel in the world than the evangelical community… There is only one place in the Middle East where Christians live safely and that is Israel. You are our brothers and sisters.”[[54]](#footnote-58) Netanyahu flew to Brazil to attend the inauguration of anti-liberal, right-wing President Jair Bolsonaro,[[55]](#footnote-59) whose election in 2018 was seen as problematic in the liberal-democratic community but was fully endorsed by Netanyahu.

Netanyahu has cultivated his special relations with the evangelicals for many years, and the Brazilian evangelical community was of particular importance, numbering over 50 million people. This fast-growing Christian community encompassed around 22% of the Brazilian population[[56]](#footnote-60) and included the wife of the populist Bolsonaro. Akiva Bigman, today the editor of *Israel Hayom* and then the senior political commentator for the pro-Bibi newspaper, who published a booklet tellingly entitled “How Netanyahu Turned Israel into an Empire,” in which he explains: “In the Israeli context, the rise of evangelism is a true gospel. In contradistinction to old Catholicism… evangelism is a current in Protestant Christianity that perceives the return of the Jews to their country after 2,000 years of exile as a necessary phase in the return of Jesus and the redemption of the world.”[[57]](#footnote-61) However, Bigman, like Netanyahu his empire-building hero, forgot the other half of the evangelical prophecy – the one that says two-thirds of the Jews will be annihilated in the battle of Armageddon and the remaining third will be christened, thus enabling Christ’s resurrection. Thus, the hidden “religious reasons” behind Bolsonaro’s promise to Netanyahu that Brazil would move its embassy to Jerusalem[[58]](#footnote-62) was that it would unleash an all-out war of the Islamists against the people of Israel, triggering the Armageddon battle and Christian redemption.

Political activism is certainly a principle of evangelism, one of many reasons why this community is so active, in both the United States and Latin America, in promoting the return of Jews to the Holy Land, including the occupied territories. Netanyahu was playing with fire in courting the most extreme leaders and funders of the evangelicals. Their vision of Israel destroying the Al-Aqsa mosque and sparking a world war that would kill the majority of Jews passed unnoticed in the Israeli media. Since the evangelicals were funding a lobby in the Israeli parliament, which included some moderate MKs and a number of ultra-Orthodox MKs, Netanyahu had reasons to think this would remain unacknowledged in Israeli politics. Bolsonaro was definitely a member of his populist-nationalist club of close friends, and Brazil was crucial for his effort to break the liberal-democratic alliance against Israel’s occupation of the Palestinian territories. In evangelical eyes, these territories were part of the Holy Land and the return of the Jews to their ancient land was a prerequisite for redemption.[[59]](#footnote-63)

“Mr. Prime Minister, our hands are open to you and we now embark on our new joint way. Israel and Brazil are like an engaged couple, in the good sense,” Bolsonaro said during his first visit to Israel in April 2019. Innovative technology is the basis for this cooperation, he noted. “Brazil is a huge and rich country and that is why our two countries draw closer together religiously, culturally, and democratically,”[[60]](#footnote-64) he added. The opening of a Brazilian trade office in Jerusalem was the occasion for Bolsonaro’s visit, and Netanyahu called it the first step towards moving the Brazilian Embassy to Israel’s capital. But the deep rationale for developing close bilateral relationships, reiterated Bolsonaro, was first and foremost religious. Exactly what “religious” rationale did he mean?

1. In the Name of Jerusalem: The Holy Land and its Settlers

With the inauguration of President Trump in 2016, evangelicals gained open access to the centers of power in Washington. They asked Trump for three things: conservative control of the Supreme Court, support for anti-abortion policies, and the relocation of the American Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.[[61]](#footnote-65) Making up 25% of the American electorate, and with Vice President Mike Pence among their ranks, the evangelicals intended to be very active in pushing their agenda. Religion as politics. Mike Pompeo, another evangelical who joined Trump’s team, first as CIA director and later as secretary of state, said: “There is a never-ending struggle until the Rapture. Be part of it. Be in the fight.”[[62]](#footnote-66) Moving the embassy to Jerusalem, for evangelicals, meant being active in bringing about the Rapture. However, the Rapture would only come after the Great Tribulation and Armageddon, in which Jerusalem played a crucial role.

Upon moving the embassy to Jerusalem, the televangelist John Hagee explained: “The State Department was so afraid to move our embassy to Jerusalem. But that to us was a very important signal of prophecy. We were waiting for that to happen for decades. It’s a fulfillment of God’s promise of what He is going to do on earth.” Hagee 23.20 Trump chose Hagee to lead the opening ceremonies for the new U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem, which the pastor concluded with calls of “Hallelujah,” as he does in all his sermons. In his “Battle for Jerusalem” sermon, Hagee proclaims: “The Jewish people do not occupy the Land of Israel; they own the Land of Israel. Says who? Says God Almighty, who created it.” (2.55) The Jewish people are the chosen people. God chose them. Indeed, with evangelism, religious interpretation turns into policy. This community has been very active in providing funds and volunteers, and in lobbying Congress and the White House to ensure that no sacred Jewish land is given to the Palestinians, because the Israelites must return to all of their biblical land in order for Christ to reappear. A *New York Times* report published in 2010, based on a study of public records in the United States and Israel, identified more than forty American groups, most of them evangelical, that had collected over $200 million in tax-deductible gifts for Jewish settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem – just in the previous decade. The money went mostly to schools, synagogues, etc., but also paid for some intriguing items: guard dogs, bulletproof vests, rifle scopes, and vehicles to secure outposts deep in occupied areas.[[63]](#footnote-67) Well, that is unsurprising; such items were perceived as directly contributing to the march toward Armageddon. It is therefore one of the favorite goals of evangelicals coming to Israel, and particularly their leadership, to meet with IDF soldiers and donate money for military purposes.[[64]](#footnote-68) Another goal of the evangelicals is to promote a conservative agenda, in particular pro-life and anti-LGBT activities. But the most peculiar alliance is between these Christian associations and the settlers in the occupied territories. Ariel is one of the most popular settlements for funding by Hagee’s organizations, including $32 million for a swimming pool. The religious context is clear: The evangelicals believe that God gave the Holy Land to the people of Israel and that the Jewish nation must return to the biblical land before the Great Tribulation and Armageddon – an all-out war in which two-thirds of the Jews will be exterminated and the survivors will embrace Jesus. Only then will the Messiah usher in the age of redemption.

1. In the Name of Jerusalem: Peace to Prosperity and Tribulation

In his “Battle for Jerusalem” sermon, Hagee does not only talk about religion; he also talks geopolitics. Hagee describes the forces gathering at the gates of Jerusalem: Russia and China, which are helping Iran, the leading terrorist state in the world and sponsor of Hamas and Hezbollah. They all seek to push America out of the Middle East. A third world war and the Rapture are imminent, the preacher says. “Everything which is going to happen is going to happen in Jerusalem. Jerusalem is the epicenter of planet earth.” Hagee, who founded Christians United for Israel in 2006, the largest pro-Israel organization in America with over 10 million active members, predicts: “The victory will be won by the son of King David, Jesus Christ of Nazareth. (14) Jerusalem is the path for prosperity.”

Indeed, this provides a different understanding of the Peace to Prosperity program presented by Trump and Netanyahu. The title is an evangelical title, the promise of redemption by Christ. Abraham, from the Abraham Accords*,* plays a crucial role in Hagee’s sermons as the common father of the monotheistic people of the Bible – Jews and Christians. Pastor Hagee, a close friend of Netanyahu, declared: “God is watching every missile. When Israel is involved in major warfare, pay attention because the eye of God is on Jerusalem every day. When you see these signs, lift up your heads and rejoice. Your redemption is close now.”[[65]](#footnote-69) The wars and bloodshed of some are a source of joy and redemption for others. Netanyahu was well aware of the eschatological vision of the evangelicals; he exploited them, just as they exploited him. Walking the thin line was ever more precarious: It was the same Hagee who said in a sermon in the late 1990s that Hitler was fulfilling God’s will to drive the Jews out of Europe and into Palestine.[[66]](#footnote-70) Even Senator John McCain, supported by Hagee in his run for the presidency, eventually distanced himself from this interpretation of the powerful preacher; Netanyahu did not.

The alliance with the evangelicals during the Trump administration culminated in moving the American Embassy to Jerusalem. It was a lone act, well-timed before an Israeli election in which Netanyahu fought for his political survival, with no compensatory gesture toward the Palestinians. Netanyahu promised that many states would follow suit and move their embassies to Jerusalem – and he even promised special help to the first ten states to do so.[[67]](#footnote-71) Guatemala, where evangelicals (including President Jimmy Morales) comprise about 40% of population, promptly followed the American example. But none of the other leaders who had made personal promises to Netanyahu moved their embassies. At most, some established a trade office or a cultural office in Jerusalem.[[68]](#footnote-72) (Kosovo and Honduras opened embassies in Jerusalem in 2021, after the Trump-Netanyahu era had already ended.)

The grand plan did not materialize for several reasons: First, the special Netanyahu-Trump relationship failed to deliver. For example, the leader of Guatemala fell out of grace with Trump over immigration issues, despite moving the Guatemalan Embassy to Jerusalem.[[69]](#footnote-73) The second major reason was the reaction of Arab states. In the face of mounting Arab pressure, Bolsonaro reneged on his promise to Netanyahu and opened a Brazilian trade office in Jerusalem instead of moving the country’s embassy there. Third, there was wall-to-wall condemnation from the EU and the UN, which demanded a return to a peace process with the Palestinians as the only path toward a stable resolution of the Jerusalem problem.

1. **Will the Change of Paradigm Survive? Military, Economic, Religious, and Personal Layers**

In his foreign policy, Netanyahu, the author of *A Place Under the Sun* and the son of historian Ben-Zion Netanyahu, was guided by his core belief in the threat of a second Holocaust.[[70]](#footnote-74) After more than a decade in power, he also came to believe that he was the only leader capable of saving the Jewish nation. As the election signs proclaimed over four consecutive election cycles, Netanyahu believed he was “in a league of his own.” He thus sought to change the paradigm in his own way. In his 2012 speech at the AIPAC policy convention, he declared:

The Jewish state will not allow those seeking our destruction to possess the means to achieve that goal. A nuclear armed Iran must be stopped… Responsible leaders should not bet the security of their countries on the belief that the world’s most dangerous regime won’t use the world’s most dangerous weapons. And I promise you that as prime minister, I will never gamble with the security of Israel… As prime minister of Israel, I will never let my people live under the shadow of annihilation…

The speech later makes explicit reference to the Holocaust:

 In my desk, I have copies of an exchange of letters between the World Jewish Congress and the U.S. War Department. The year was 1944. The World Jewish Congress implored the American government to bomb Auschwitz. The reply came five days later. I want to read it to you. “Such an operation could be executed only by diverting considerable air support essential to the success of our forces elsewhere...and in any case would be of such doubtful efficacy that it would not warrant the use of our resources…” And here’s the most remarkable sentence of all. And I quote: “Such an effort might provoke even more vindictive action by the Germans.” Think about that – “even more vindictive action” than the Holocaust… We deeply appreciate the great alliance between our two countries. But when it comes to Israel’s survival, we must always remain the masters of our fate.[[71]](#footnote-75)

The focus of Netanyahu’s new paradigm was the Iranian threat, which reshaped Israel’s relationships with both the United States and the regional powers. The Iranian nuclear threat is the new threat of annihilation the Jews face. In his AIPAC speech, he outlined the parallels between the U.S. refusal to bomb Auschwitz and Obama’s purported refusal to keep nuclear weapons out of the hands of Iran. Such an attack on an American president by an Israeli prime minister was unprecedented. But this was not the first time for Netanyahu,. In 1998, during his first term as prime minister, Netanyahu participated in an event organized by televangelist Jerry Falwell just before meeting President Bill Clinton at the White House. Falwell had accused Clinton of being a drug dealer and a murderer.[[72]](#footnote-76) Netanyahu was hoping that Clinton would not be reelected and publicly humiliated the American president.

There were, of course, other Israeli prime ministers who had attempted to intervene in U.S. politics: Menachem Begin actively worked against Jimmy Carter and for Ronald Reagan, and later lobbied to stop Reagan from selling the AWACS warning system to Saudi Arabia; and Yitzhak Shamir used AIPAC to try to change President George H.W. Bush’s anti-settlements policies.[[73]](#footnote-77) But these attempts targeted both Democratic and Republican presidents. Netanyahu’s paradigm led him to believe that the Democratic Party, and especially its presidents, were on the wrong side of history – on both the Iranian and the Palestinian issues. From the very beginning of his first term in office, his active involvement on behalf of Republican candidates, tapping into their most radical and extremist base – the evangelicals and fundamental Christians – was contrary to the tradition of bipartisan American support for Israel. Netanyahu unabashedly favored Republican candidates, and most notoriously, Trump. Their warm personal relationship also enabled Netanyahu to facilitate favors that other countries sought from the American president, Netanyahu’s best friend. The salient examples, of course, are the American recognition of Moroccan sovereignty in Western Sahara, and Trump’s promise to remove Sudan from the list of state sponsors of terrorism. The personal relations between Trump and Netanyahu were also crucial in Israel’s dialogue with Latin America states – especially regarding the transfer of embassies to Jerusalem. As noted, Guatemala and Honduras moved their embassies to Jerusalem, while Brazil made do with opening a trade office. Paraguay initially followed Guatemala’s lead and opened an embassy in Jerusalem, but moved it back to Tel Aviv only four months later. Hinging foreign policy on personal relationships had a price.[[74]](#footnote-78)

Back to the paradigm change. Once the Iranian threat shifted the internal power relations within the Middle East, placing Israel and the moderate Sunni regimes on the same side, and once Trump unequivocally condemned Islamic terrorism and fundamentalism, the time was ripe for removing the Palestinian issue from the center of the Middle Eastern agenda. As Amit Segal noted, Netanyahu’s “mega-goal” was to “strangle the Palestinian idea.”[[75]](#footnote-79) This goal was finally achieved in Trump’s “deal of the century,” which described the Palestinians as “pawns” who were “trapped in a cycle of terrorism.”[[76]](#footnote-80) Indeed, Trump’s analysis of “the big lie” and the title of his program (“Peace for Prosperity”)symbolized the narrative in which he was trapped – that of evangelism. The Land of Israel – all of it – belongs to the ancient Jewish people, as does its capital, Jerusalem. The Palestinians, refusing to accept this worldview, were pushed out of the new Middle East. The Abraham Accords built a security and economic alliance between Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain, Saudi Arabia’s proxy. Netanyahu achieved his mega-goal. “I can only say that we are standing shoulder to shoulder with states in the moderate camp in the Arab world against the dangers of radical Islam, regardless if it’s coming from Iran or ISIS.”[[77]](#footnote-81) However, Netanyahu went a step too far. Speaking at the launch of the “Peace to Prosperity” plan in Washington, Netanyahu basically presented Trump’s plan as a green light for Israel to annex the occupied territories. Trump’s White House was furious with Netanyahu and explicitly declared this to be untrue.[[78]](#footnote-82)

In order to strengthen this new paradigm, Netanyahu worked with Eastern European leaders such as Orbán and Morawiecki, building upon Islamophobia and the anti-immigration sentiment shared by like-minded populist nationalists to try to achieve a new balance at the EU against the liberal bloc of Western European democracies. The personal, economic, and military were combined to engender a new set of relationships. Yet the ties between Netanyahu and these illiberal leaders created a very problematic situation when it came to addressing the anti-Semitism rampant among some of his newfound allies. For example, this led Netanyahu to condone the comparison of anti-Polonism to the Holocaust. He even turned a blind eye when his own camp published blatantly anti-Semitic caricatures of Soros. Netanyahu thus completely weakened Israel’s claim to be the protector of all Jews. Indeed, the one-sidedness of Netanyahu vis-à-vis the Republican Party created a rift within the American Jewish community, which is predominantly liberal and votes in great numbers for the Democratic Party. While Ben-Gurion, the leader Netanyahu admired, chose the United States over the USSR, condemning Stalin and stirring rage within his own pro-Soviet kibbutzim at home, Netanyahu unequivocally supported the Republicans, alienating American Jewry and the liberal democratic states of the EU and the world.

If anti-Islamic immigration became the symbol of the Eastern European bond, evangelism was the glue binding Israel’s relationships with right-wing Latin America leaders. As noted, after the United States (25% evangelicals) moved its embassy to Jerusalem, Guatemala (40% evangelicals) and Honduras (37% evangelicals) followed suit. For them, it was part of a biblical prophecy, a necessary step toward the Great Tribulation, Armageddon, and the third world war from which only the Christians would be saved, with Christ returning to Jerusalem to take his community with him. In the end, Netanyahu failed to deliver on his promise that the move of the American Embassy would prompt a wave of states to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital.

In terms of personal glory, the bond with President Trump was essential in fortifying Netanyahu’s world status. This became apparent in his efforts to forge special relationships with world leaders of the same ideological bent. Bolsonaro, the nationalist leader of Brazil, Narendra Modi, the Hindu nationalist of India, and Orbán, the illiberal Hungarian leader – along with Trump and Vladimir Putin, were the key leaders Netanyahu proudly presented to the Israeli public as his personal friends.[[79]](#footnote-83) This magnified his status as a statesman, the only statesman in Israel after the death of Shimon Peres. Indeed, the choice of these particular leaders was no coincidental: The personal connections were based on a shared ideological outlook. They were all right-wing conservative leaders who did not seek votes in the center of the political map, but were proud nationalist-populist leaders. National pride, patriotism, Islamophobia, and anti-immigration were their core values; liberalism, and especially equality, justice, civil rights organizations, and the media were designated as enemies of the people. These nationalist leaders viewed themselves as chosen by the people and actively worked to weaken the media, the Supreme Court, and human rights NGOs. In short, their goal was to tip the scales against liberal democracy in their respective states.

What did Netanyahu’s foreign policy achieve and at what price? It shattered the concept that there can be no progress in the Middle East until the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is resolved: Netanyahu midwifed four peace treatments with Arab states, establishing economic cooperation that is here to stay. Even the change of government in Washington and Jerusalem has not changed this reality. Netanyahu also boasted of discrediting a related assumption – that Israel would be isolated if no progress was made on the Palestinian front. In a speech in 2017, he said: “Gentlemen, let’s agree once and for all – there is no political tsunami and no political isolation. There is a political renaissance.”[[80]](#footnote-84) Netanyahu had prophesized in *A Place Under the Sun* that military power creates economic power that creates political power, and now this prophecy was fulfilled. However, the new alliances formed after removing the Palestinians from center stage already began to deteriorate in the Netanyahu-Trump era. The conflicts over anti-Semitism weakened the alliance with Poland and the Visegrád states, and the Netanyahu-Trump bond did not deliver for the Central America states, even those that moved their embassies to Jerusalem. The sweeping international recognition of Jerusalem as the unified capital of Israel, as predicted by Netanyahu, did not materialize due to pressure from the Arab states. Trump himself was furious with Netanyahu’s interpretation of the peace plan as a green light for annexing the occupied territories. He was further enraged when Netanyahu, his closest international partner, congratulated Biden (albeit belatedly) on his electoral victory. Netanyahu’s approach to Israeli-American relations caused collateral damage that his successors must now address, including the erosion of bipartisan support for Israel and the rift with American Jewry.

To disprove the international isolation thesis, Netanyahu created alliances with a number of states. But his focus was on a particular type of state: those with right-wing governments that took nationalism to an extreme. Even a moderate right-wing leader, like Germany’s Angela Merkel, found that her words were distorted by Netanyahu; she reiterated that Germany supports in the two-state solution, despite Netanyahu’s position.[[81]](#footnote-85) Netanyahu’s ideological alliance and close personal ties with Islamophobes and evangelicals were indeed problematic. However, it may very well have enabled “the huge leap in Israel’s status and strength under the leadership of Netanyahu,” as Bigman concludes in “How Netanyahu Turned Israel into an Empire.” Ironically, the long-term effect of the Netanyahu paradigm is likely to be the economic ties between the Abraham Accords partners, as well as other states that used the Trump-Netanyahu era to strengthen their bilateral relations with Israel in the fields of agriculture, defense systems, and cyber initiatives. The fundamental belief of Netanyahu and Trump was that “the economy does the work,” and that is what will likely survive from the Netanyahu paradigm. Whether this will endure mounting international pressure to return to the old paradigm, including Israel’s return to the family of liberal democracies – time will tell.

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