

In an exclusive interview, Benjamin Netanyahu calls on the Palestinian leader to quell terrorism and explains why he will never share Jerusalem

'Arafat is riding a tiger'

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In Jerusalem

THE prime minister of Israel had just been briefed on the forthcoming 30 minutes - an interview with a relatively non-hostile journalist. For a man who suffers no friends either in the press or on the international stage, I assumed that the charming, charismatic, media savvy politician would breeze his way through this, and that I would have an instant rapport with him.

The instantaneous glance proved me wrong. From that first moment I knew I had been fed misinformation. While the whole world ponders Benjamin Netanyahu's tactics, and the Palestinian Authority tries to buoy up the hopes of an ever more desperate population, Benjamin Netanyahu - whose name literally means given by God - has never for one minute doubted his strategy.

That strategy is to dominate the enemy, to force them into submission, to obliterate any hope that the Oslo accord may have given them, and to do what Bibi Netanyahu thinks is good

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for them. He lives by the Likud former prime minister Yitzhak Shamir's famous adage: "The sea is the same sea, the Arabs are the same Arabs."

"It is important to understand that we're on the seamline between two very different cultures," the prime minister pontificated. "We're part of a Western, liberal democratic ethos which respects political freedom and individual rights. On the other side is another culture and there cannot be a Western-style peace because our partners are not part of the Western culture. It is impossible to have a warm peace, that is only possible in the confines of a uniform civilisation."

"A cold peace," Mr Netanyahu continued, "is a hell of a lot better than a hot war."

Bibi Netanyahu will have to try to make peace, not because he wants to but because he has to. In order to get re-elected in the year 2000 he needs to show the Israeli population that his strong-arm tactics will deliver his famous "peace with security". Trying to find an Israeli who is not disillusioned with him is difficult, if not impossible.

"Trying to achieve a secure peace means you have to start with reality," the prime minister, continued as he expanded on the central theme of his policy. "When you wake up from a dream, when your dream turns

out to be unrealistic or shattered, you have three choices. One is to accept reality, two is to cling to an unrealistic dream and the third is to blame someone. I suppose you could divide the responses of the disappointments of Oslo into those three categories."

While army conscription still exists for both men and women, there is the start of a sea change in the tiny state of Israel. Mr Netanyahu is dealing with a new generation of Israelis. They are no longer the pioneer socialists who came after the horrors of the Second World War to build a nation. They are third generation Sabras (people born in Israel) who want to watch MTV, travel, go to university and live their lives. They also have parents who do not want to see their sons die in Lebanon.

The process of real normalisation has begun in Israel. A growing group of Israelis is vocalising ever more loudly that it cannot condone and does not understand or accept the government's hostile policies towards the Palestinian neighbours - the confiscation of land owned by Arabs, the withholding of Jerusalem without which Palestinians cannot enter Israel to work.

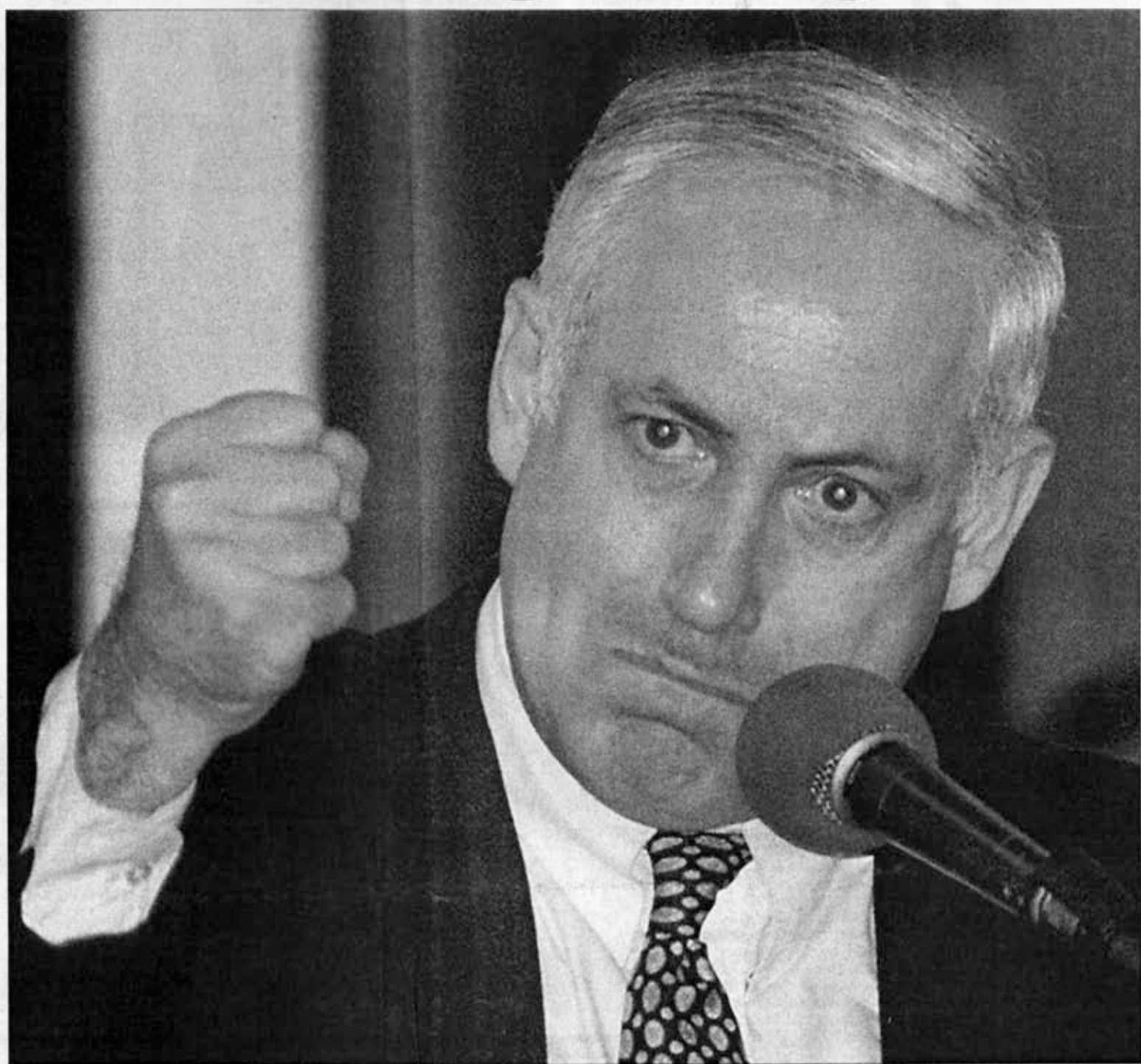
"We believe Palestinians should run their affairs in every way; internal affairs, some powers such as those relating to the environment we could share - but some powers, especially those relating to external security, would remain with Israel," Mr Netanyahu said.

But what, I asked him, is less than a state and more than an authority?

"I'm not sure I would use those terms. We're opposed to a Palestinian state because the term state usually includes sovereign powers that no Israeli in his right mind would accord the Palestinian entity. Those include control over airspace or the ability to import dangerous weapons into the hills around Tel Aviv or the ability to make military pacts with some of the more unsavoury regimes around the Arab world."

"The Palestinians will, of course, demand a state; they'll also demand the 1947 partition line. They demand the right of return, they demand conditions that spell the dissolution of the state of Israel. The fact that they demand doesn't mean we have to accept, we're putting forward something that is commensurate with the needs of realistic aspirations of all responsible parties on both sides."

"We have to work out an arrangement to enable Palestinians to live their lives on these hills, but it is not going to be a solution where we kick them out or they kick us out. Between the Jordan and the sea is a very small stretch of land; two peoples are going to have to live side by side, no one is going to drive the other out."



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu maintains that peace will only be possible in the Middle East with a strong and secure Israel. Uzi Keren/AP

Yet left-wing academics, life-long members of Labour - some of whom have seen light in Mr Netanyahu's policies - despair at his tactics. The majority believes Mr Netanyahu to be detrimental to peace, to be the obstacle stalling the whole process. They feel he is trying to use the Palestinian president, Yasser Arafat, as a policeman, while he accuses the Palestinian leader of not controlling Hamas. "In this type of very tough neighbourhood, the only peace you can have is a peace based on strength and security," he said. "Oslo was flawed because it sacrificed a good portion of our strength and security on the basis of promises that have not been kept."

One of the central final status issues in the peace process is

Jerusalem, a holy capital for Muslim and Jew. "Jerusalem will remain a united city under Israel, there is no other option," he said. "It's not going to be divided. I will say the reason it is now an open city to all three

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faiths for the first time in a millennia is because it is under Jewish sovereignty. "It is only since the Six Day War that all religions have enjoyed free ac-

cess to the holy sites. Whereas we want to give full religious autonomy in the city, we will not re-divide it. We will not create two sovereignties; anyone suggesting that should understand that the re-division of Jerusalem politically would be a descent into religious intolerance."

The Israelis live in fear of the next terrorist attack, the Palestinians sink deeper into depression as closures bring poverty, and the fundamental Islamic elements on the Palestinian side radicalise a demoralised and despondent youth.

Although the peace process is undoubtedly at its lowest ebb, there is a school of thought that believes Likud is the only party that could bring peace to the region, that the Israeli public would entrust him to deliver

peace within the confines of security. However, it is hard to find many who subscribe to this view. Regardless of Mr Netanyahu's substance, and he is an intelligent man with a deep understanding of a vastly complex situation, he is unlikely to be the man to deliver "peace".

Oslo was a flawed agreement, no question about it. We agreed to keep it providing that the other side kept to their bargain. One big mistake was not to deal directly with the Palestinian leadership here in the territories. In many ways it forced them to accept terms they weren't consulted on, but nevertheless this is their choice, this is the situation now and we're not going to change it.

"I guess the biggest flaw was the construction of a system of a

relationship between Israelis and the Palestinians that placed a good part of the onus on fighting terrorism on the Palestinians themselves, many of whom were practising terrorists."

When asked if he wanted a strong Palestinian President Arafat, he said: "I want an Arafat strongly committed to peace and strongly fighting terrorism. Ultimately, it is good for Arafat, too. The longer he dallies with Hamas, the stronger Hamas becomes and the greater the danger to peace and the greater the danger to the Palestinian Authority. Mr Netanyahu concluded with a warning to the Palestinian leader: "Arafat is riding a tiger that will ultimately devour him - he has to get off the tiger and confront it."