

Netanyahu adviser moves out of the shadows

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US forced to rehabilitate former spy Uzi Arad

Nazareth. As might be expected of a former senior official with Israel's spy agency Mossad, Uzi Arad — the most trusted political adviser to Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister — has got used to being in the shadows as he exerts influence.

But that is fast changing. Mr Arad was prominent in preparing Mr Netanyahu's tough positions as he headed for Washington this week to meet Barack Obama, the US president, who is seeking to advance a Middle East peace plan.

Mr Arad, recently appointed the head of Israel's revamped National Security Council, will oversee an organisation that Mr Netanyahu regards as the linchpin of the new government's security and foreign policy.

One military analyst, Amir Oren, has noted that, given Mr Netanyahu's unstable coalition, Mr Arad "is likely to emerge as a strong adviser to a weak government".

Mr Arad has been outspoken both in rejecting Palestinian statehood and in promoting the military option against Iran, positions believed to be shared by the Israeli prime minister and that will be at the root of a possible confrontation in the coming months with the Obama administration.

Mr Arad is also one of only a handful of senior figures on Mr Netanyahu's Iran Task Force, charged with devising a strategy for dealing with Tehran and its supposed ambitions to attain nuclear weapons.

That will make some in Israel uneasy. The hawkish views that have made Mr Arad indispensable to Mr Netanyahu have also earned him several high-profile opponents.

Arik Carmon, founder of the Israel Democracy Institute, has described Mr Arad's proposal to arrange "territorial exchanges" to strip some of Israel's Palestinian minority of their citizenship as "racist".

Alon Liel, a former director-general of Israel's foreign ministry, has called Mr Arad's efforts to derail recent talks with Syria by demanding the continuing occupation of the Golan "ridiculous and nasty".

In 2007, before his rise to public prominence, Mr Arad also fuelled worried speculation about Israel's plans for a military strike on Tehran, after he described it as "easier than you think".

A wide range of non-military Iranian targets were legitimate, he added.

But despite Mr Arad's espousal of opinions that in many respects accord with those of Avigdor Lieberman, leader of the far-right Yisrael Beiteinu Party and Mr Netanyahu's foreign minister, few doubt the prime minister's fierce loyalty to him.

In a sign of that commitment, Mr Netanyahu pushed through Mr Arad's appointment as national security adviser, a post in which he will need to be in almost continual consultation with the US, at the risk of provoking a diplomatic crisis with the Obama White House.

He had been barred from entering the US by the Bush administration after implication in a spying scandal. A Pentagon official, Larry Franklin, jailed in 2006 for passing secrets about Iran to the Israel lobby group AIPAC, was reported to have met Mr Arad frequently.

When the US secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, arrived in Jerusalem in April for meetings with Mr Netanyahu, then prime minister-designate, her staff quietly suggested he remove an official — a hint that Mr Arad's presence was not welcome. Mr Netanyahu instead sent out Sallai Meridor, the ambassador to the US, who resigned soon afterwards.

The Obama administration has since restored Mr Arad's visa and agreed to his political rehabilitation, not least so that he will be able regularly to meet his US opposite number, Gen James Jones.

Mr Arad spent more than 20 years in Mossad, much of it working in the intelligence section, before being appointed as Mr Netanyahu's foreign policy adviser in his first government in the late 1990s.

He was also closely associated with a leading neoconservative think-tank in New York, the Hudson Institute, in the 1970s.

But paradoxically, his influence on Israeli thinking — both among policymakers and the public — may have actually increased during his years in political opposition, after the fall of the first Netanyahu government in 1999.

It was then that he established an influential think-tank, the Institute for Policy and Strategy, at the Herzliya Interdisciplinary Centre.

The institute stages an annual conference, dedicated to the "balance of Israel's national security", that has become the most important event in the Israeli calendar for politicians, generals and diplomats, as well as attracting high-profile US guests.

Since the first meeting in 2000, the conferences have defined the major security issues supposedly facing Israel, closely mirroring Mr Arad's own key obsessions.

Chief among these have been fears about the demographic threat to Israel's Jewishness from Palestinian birth rates both in the occupied territories and among Israel's own Palestinian citizens, and the danger posed to Israeli hegemony in the region from Iran's acquisition of a nuclear bomb.

In an indication of his implacable opposition to a Palestinian state, Mr Arad recently told an

interviewer: “We want to relieve ourselves of the burden of Palestinian populations, not the territories.”

He has suggested that the Palestinians be required to become economically self-reliant, in the hope that their leaders will be forced to promote family planning methods to reduce the population. His motto is that the Palestinians need “one man, one job” before they need “one man, one vote”.

He has also promoted a complex territorial exchange involving Israel, the Palestinian Authority and Egypt that would see many Palestinians relocated to the Sinai so that Israel could take control of chunks of the West Bank.

But his greatest vehemence is reserved for Iran — an antipathy apparently shared by the Israeli prime minister. In the past he has called for “maximum deterrence”, including threats to strike “anything and everything of value” in Iran, including its “holiest sites”.

As Mr Netanyahu’s plane touched down in Washington on Sunday, Mr Arad briefed reporters that Tehran posed an “existential” threat to Israel and that “all options are indeed on the table”.

Jonathan Cook is a writer and journalist based in Nazareth, Israel. His latest books are “Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East” (Pluto Press) and “Disappearing Palestine: Israel’s Experiments in Human Despair” (Zed Books). His website is www.jkcook.net.

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