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DeSantis says Iran 'only understands strength'; backs Israel in 'whatever action' needed to defend itself

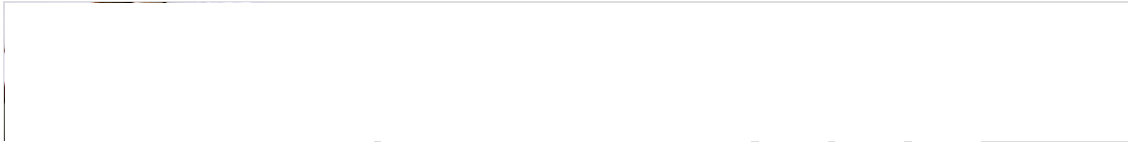
In special interview with Israel Hayom, the newly minted presidential contender says Israel's "claim to Judea and Samaria is most superior" and calls Biden's treatment of Netanyahu "a disgrace." The Florida governor also shares his views on the charges against Donald Trump.

 By Ariel Kahana — Published on 06-22-2023 21:29 — Last modified: 06-23-2023 13:15





Ariel Kahana conducts an interview with Governor Ron DeSantis | Photo: C.B. Lorch



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Governor Ron DeSantis, who has recently entered the Republican presidential primaries, gave *Israel Hayom* an exclusive interview on Thursday – the first to an Israeli outlet as an official candidate in the 2024 race. During the interview, he discussed a whole range of issues while attacking the Biden administration over its policies toward Israel and its government.

DeSantis, 44, announced his presidential bid in May, and according to the polls, he currently has the best shot at beating former President Donald Trump in the fight over his party's nomination among all other contenders. His vocal message against woke ideology championed by Democratic progressives had him coast to reelection this past November, and he has vowed that he would run on the same ticket as the Republican standard bearer should he become the nominee.

Gray skies and relentless rain blanketed Tallahassee, Florida's sleepy capital, as I walked into his office. His dual role as a presidential contender and governor means that his schedule is almost beyond what is humanly possible. When he campaigns, he hops between US states and travels thousands of miles in the air. If he is exhausted from the effort, it doesn't show. DeSantis, it seems, has a lot of stamina.

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Q: I would like to begin, of course, with the Israel-US ties. It's been six months since the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu took office, and he is yet to be invited by the Biden administration. How do you view this policy?

"I think it's disgraceful. The US-Israel relationship should be ironclad. We have no better ally in the Middle East. And we have such strong cultural and religious ties to the State of Israel, for them to be treating Israel really with the back of their hand. I think it's a mistake, but I think it's part and parcel of how this administration sees the world. I mean, they're more interested in kowtowing to Iran than standing by our allies. And so, you know, my view as president would be we're going to have a really strong US-Israel relationship, and that'll be something that Americans can be proud of."

Video: Ron DeSantis speaks with Israel Hayom

Q: When it comes to Israel, our number one priority is Iran. If you become president, what will you do regarding Tehran and its nuclear facilities?

"Well, the whole Obama-Khamenei deal [2015 nuclear agreement] was a total disaster and Biden is trying to resuscitate that and basically, when you give concessions to the Iranians, they use that money to be able to foment terrorism. They will put that money into weapons development. And so I think squeezing Iran, making sure that they understand that their pursuit of this is going to be bad for them economically, diplomatically, and potentially even militarily, that is the way the only thing that the mullahs understand – strength. You can't try to cozy up to them. It just doesn't work. So we would be supportive of Israel's predicament. And obviously, we would have a much stronger posture against Iran."

Q: As I recall, you had a part in pushing the move of the US embassy to Jerusalem. Would you support Israel applying its sovereignty to parts of Judea and Samaria or some part of it?

"So just on the embassy, I don't think Biden's fully committed to keeping the embassy there. He doesn't believe Jerusalem is going to be the undivided capital of Israel, but I think that their [Biden's] view would be pre-1967 and we reject that. I mean, Jerusalem is the indivisible, undivided capital of the Jewish people. And so with me, it would be very clear that that's just the way it's going to ride."

"Now in terms of Judea and Samaria, I've always rejected this idea that it's occupied territory. I mean, these are some of the most historic Jewish lands going all the way back to biblical times. Yes, there was a partition plan with the UN in the 1940s. But the Arabs rejected the Partition Plan. It'd be one thing if they accepted it. Israel was willing to accept, they rejected it. And then they chose to wage war for many decades."

"And so it's not occupied territory. It is disputed territory, and I think Israel's claim

is the most superior in terms of anybody else for it. I was the first major elected official as governor in 2019, to do public events in Judea and Samaria. at Ariel University, and we wanted to break the stigma that somehow this is not appropriate to be doing and when we have imposed our anti-BDS sanctions on companies that have targeted Israel, it's usually been they've been targeting Jews living in Judea and Samaria. And so we said that's unacceptable. So whether it was Ben&Jerry's or Airbnb, and then we most recently just did legislation. *Morningstar* tried to include BDS criteria for ESG. And we said 'Absolutely not, that's not going to fly in the state of Florida'."

Q: So if Israel decided to apply its law on some parts of the Jordan Valley or other parts of Judea and Samaria, would you support it?

"I think Israel has the strongest claim of right in Judea and Samaria. Of anybody. I do not believe it's occupied territory. I think it's been disputed territory, and I think they have the right to act appropriately."

Q: When you say that only strength works, do you mean military action as well?

"I think we have a great deterrent capacity, but it's not as good as it used to be. One of the things I'll do as president is rebuild some of our military capacity

because – particularly when you look at our ability to project power – we have like 200 navy ships in the Navy. We used to have almost 600 back in [Ronald] Reagan's day. So there's a lot that we need to do. But at the end of the day, I can say this – Iran represents an existential threat to the State of Israel. Now they would love to wipe Israel off the map. They would love to wipe out America, don't get me wrong. I mean, there's no love lost for either.

"But given Israel's geographic proximity to Iran, Israel's relatively small size, they could potentially – if armed with nuclear weapons – try to completely annihilate Israel in a way that they may not have the capability to go after us yet. So I think for Israel, you don't get a more significant threat.

"Using a nuclear weapon on another country is something that you would not want to do because you could get a nuclear response so why would you want that mutually assured destruction that kept the nukes in check during the Cold War, and it keeps most civilized countries in check from wanting to do that? However, this Iranian regime with the ayatollahs may view that as positive because it may coincide with their apocalyptic vision for the end of time. So I think from that perspective, Israel has a right to defend itself and the US should be supportive of them taking whatever action they need to defend themselves."

Q: What is your opinion about the possible nuclear understanding between the US and Iran?

"First of all, you have to understand, obviously the US has suffered terrorist attacks, 9/11 and whatnot. But if you look at what nation-state has killed more Americans since 1979, Iran has killed more Americans, whether it's the Marine barracks in Beirut, they killed at least 1,000 US troops in Iraq by funding Shia militia, and so the idea that we're going to have some understanding, I just don't see that in the cards."

Q: I know you are a great supporter of the Jewish community here. But people who claim to be your supporters also have flags with swastikas and so forth. What do you tell those people?

"That's a farce though you understand they'll wear masks. The media doesn't investigate who these people are. They are trying to manufacture some association with me. I can tell you, if someone honestly carried around a swastika, I'm the last guy they would want [to support]. I am the most pro-Israel governor in America. We have taken steps to support our Jewish community here, spending a massive amount of money for security for Jewish day schools because they could be targeted with antisemitic attacks. We just passed a bill to help combat some of the property crime antisemitic property crimes. We have the First Amendment you can burn a cross on your yard but you can't put it in front of someone else's property. You can display a swastika if you want. It's protected under the First Amendment, but you can't project that on a synagogue which is private property. So we've been very strong on that. But be very careful about what some of these political people are doing. They're trying to create a narrative as if somehow these people have a foothold in Florida. That is not true. We have more Jewish migration into Florida, particularly Orthodox Jews, who are usually the ones targeted with antisemitic attacks than anybody any place in the United States and so if you see one of those as a journalist, go ask those people. Ask them, 'Who are you? Why do you have your face covered? Why are you doing this?' And the flags will oftentimes be creased, clearly they've never been used before. So they're just being put out, so I'd be very careful and suspicious of that stuff."

Q: America is deeply involved in supporting Ukraine. On the other hand, we see China become more and more involved, primarily in the Middle East.

What is more risky for America? Is it Ukraine or China, which I just heard is now preparing to build a base not far from here in Cuba? How do you see all that?

"China is our number one geopolitical threat by far? First of all, they're near-peer competitors, their economy has grown leaps and bounds over the last generation largely because of poor American policy that has allowed them to capture so much manufacturing strength, and our economy, unfortunately, has become very dependent on China for really key ingredients. When COVID hit almost everything we needed had to come from China. Why would you want to put yourself in that position, to have an adversary that you have to rely on? It's not just medical, it's ammunition, it's things for our nuclear weapons. Almost everything that we do in some respects is tied to China. Not a good position for you to be in. What has Xi Jinping done? Xi is the most ideological Chinese leader since Mao Zedong. He has ambitions beyond Mainland China. And you see it obviously, of course in the Pacific, it's discussed, but in our own hemisphere here in the West, what he's done in Central America and now this news about Cuba, putting what an East dropping station, putting something a potential training base there, the US needs to have a 21st century Monroe Doctrine where we're looking out for our backyard, and some of these other hostile powers should not just be able to come in come in here and do that. Why are they doing that though? They're doing it because they know they're not gonna get any pushback from Biden. They flew a spy balloon clear across the continental United States. The US government presumably knew or tracked this; they did nothing about it until it already finished going across the country. And if people had not noticed it, our US government may not have done anything about it. And so when they see stuff like that, that's going to embolden them to project more power, but I think it's very important that we maintain good alliances in the Pacific. South Korea and Japan are now getting along. They almost never get along. I mean, they've had tensions for decades, right, but they're getting along because they both see the mutual threat posed by China."

Q: As Florida governor who may one day be president, what would you do, for example, with such a base so close to Florida?

"Well, I can tell you what I've done as governor. We're limited in what we can do. We recognize the role that Chinese influence has played in the United States. So we eliminated these Confucius Institutes from our universities. We didn't have a lot of them. It's basically propaganda for the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) so we got rid of those. We also prohibited CCP-linked businesses and individuals from purchasing land in Florida because they want to gobble up farmland. They want to gobble up land near military bases and other strategic locations. So we said not in Florida, so we've taken really strong action to protect Floridians against it. At the end of the day, when you're talking about something with Cuba. That's something only the president of the United States is going to be able to deal with. I have not heard President Biden sound a peep about this. And I have no idea if he has any plans or if he's just gonna let it happen. But you remember during the 1960s when Kennedy was president, they didn't let the Soviets come and just put nuclear missiles in Cuba. That was viewed as a huge threat to us. So why would you want China to have a military outpost right there 90 miles off our shore? I think it'd be a huge threat to our security."

Q: You are famous for fighting the woke agenda. Why are you so strongly against it?

"It's basically a form of Cultural Marxism in the United States. They're trying to elevate identity politics, at the expense of merit and achievement. And they really are waging a war on truth itself. What is your identity? Where are you in the pecking order? And so for example, Woke is very anti-Israel. Why? Because Israel is a successful country and they buy into a lot of tropes about that. And so it's very nasty in terms of how they view Israel."

Q: Woke is a risk for Israel?

"No question about that. I mean, they would side with Palestinian Arabs over Israel on any issue, they would be very supportive of making concessions to Iran, that mindset 100%. But it also ridiculous things like saying that men can get pregnant, they are saying that in the United States right now. And it's like, wait a minute, is your society rooted in truth or not? You got to be rooted in truth two plus two has to equal four. And so we recognize that it's a threat to just solid thinking, it also affects people's lives in these ways. When woke overtakes the economy with things like ESG, the average person becomes poor as a result of those policies. When woke overtakes education, the average student ends up dumber. As a result of that, when woke overtakes criminal justice, the average family becomes less safe in their communities because, in places like San Francisco, prosecutors let criminals get away with crimes. You can rob someone's house with some of these prosecutors, and they won't bring charges against you; that hollows out those communities. And so as it infects institutions in American life, those institutions really become corrupted. So really, we're fighting back here saying, we need to restore sanity in this country, and we need to return normalcy to our communities and our institutions have to have integrity."

Q: There is a very famous trial going on here against the former president, what is your position about all the charges against him?

"Well, look, I think people are innocent until proven guilty. We've had a problem in this country for many years now, with these Washington, DC agencies pursuing a political agenda, and we've seen it go back 10-12 years, when the IRS was targeting conservative groups. These are small conservative sit groups of citizens, nonprofit groups that the IRS was targeting with disfavored treatment. When Trump became president they [the agencies] concocted the Russia collusion hoax which was a conspiracy theory and it was designed to kneecap his presidency and even drag him out of office. He has obviously professed his innocence; he's innocent until proven guilty. But what my mission is going to be as president...we're going to clean house in those agencies. We are not going to let political power be weaponized against political opponents. We are going to make sure that there's accountability because people have to have confidence in the justice system. Look at Hunter Biden. If he were a Republican he would have been in jail a long time ago and yet he gets a slap on the wrist he basically gets diversion on the gun charge, which usually people are not allowed to get. Why would he be treated that way? Well because he's connected to the DC elite class. That's not right. You can't have two standards of justice and so you know his case. I think we see through that prism of how these agencies have been behaving in these regards."

Q: Your abortion law in Florida, some say is too tough, with the cutoff being roughly six weeks. What do you say about that?

"In Florida, these are done by legislature In the governor signs. The law restricts abortion when there's a detectable heartbeat for the unborn baby, that's when the protections are for life attached. They did provide exceptions for rape and incest and the life of the mother and victims of human trafficking. But at the end of the day, we want to promote a culture of life. I believe that abortion should not just be a form of birth control. We also take action. Not everyone's born into perfect circumstances. You have people that are poor and so we've done a lot to lift people up. We've provided more health coverage, we've provided more foster and adoption services, we've provided more help for single mothers; that's really making a difference even apart from that whole debate. If a mother feels like

she's going to have support, that's going to be something that she's gonna then be able to pursue. So we were able to do that and I think that's something that's going to end up working out very well for us."

Since launching his campaign in a glitch-ridden online conversation on Twitter Space with Elon Musk, DeSantis' standing has been far from ideal among Republican voters, who according to one poll support Trump decisively over his challenger 61% to 23%.

De Santis was barred from speaking freely about the campaign during the interview because of legal reasons: The conversation was held at the governor's office in Florida. The law prohibits using state resources for campaigning.

And yet, there is no mistaking the very different tune coming out of DeSantis compared to what we have become used to from President Joe Biden when it comes to Israel. In fact, it looks as though there is almost no difference in the views he and Trump have on Israel.

"The Left is gonna absolutely destroy this country even more than it is if Biden remains in office," DeSantis has recently warned on the campaign trail.

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Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich speaks with Israel Hayom about the hot-button issues, including on what credit rating agencies think on the situation in Israel. He also hits back at his critics who say the government funds yeshivot on the backs of the non-Haredi public.

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Three hours after doing an allnighter in the Knesset to pass the state budget – the largest in Israeli history – Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich gave an interview to *Israel Hayom* rather than catch up on some sleep.

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Clearly feeling a sense of great satisfaction and breathing a sigh of relief after clearing a major hurdle, Smotrich tried to sidestep the infighting in the coalition during the interview. Despite not shutting an eye for more than two hours, he comes alive when talking about his economic agenda.

Q: Congratulations on the budget. Are you happy with it despite the heavy criticism – including by your Finance Ministry officials – on the wasteful spending for Coalition partners' demands?

"It wasn't an easy feat to accomplish; nevertheless, this is a truly good budget, and it is also fiscally conservative and it reins in spending, which is critical in the inflationary environment we are in. This environment poses the biggest challenge for this government right now. I said right from the get-go that we will keep spending in check. We have to ensure that our fiscal policy is in lockstep with the monetary policy, otherwise, the Bank of Israel governor will have to hike interest rates again and again."

Having passed the budget, it's clear that Smotrich exudes confidence, resulting in clear-cut statements on taxation – and head-on attacks on the media. "We went for a budget that sets a target deficit of 0.8-0.9%, but now the chief economist says we are going to hit 1.1%. But even if we end up with 2%, this is nothing to worry about. All the lies in the media, all the doom and gloom about cutting back on programs, and the articles on how my ministry is supposedly considering raising taxes. But I am willing to say – taxes won't go up; there won't be cuts to programs, because we don't need it."

Q: Can you pledge that you will meet the goal of having a 0.9% deficit at most?

"No, but I don't have to. The normal deficit goal is 2.5%. We are now in an era of global uncertainty, and perhaps this could be a great opportunity for the Israeli market. We have a safety net: Even if we see revenues drop between 30 to 40 billion shekels in 2024, we will have still not crossed the 2-2.5% threshold. We will not raise taxes, perhaps even go the other way."

Q: Let's talk about the special property tax fund that will use money

collected by rich municipalities in order to fund projects in poorer ones.

"For more than 20 years the Knesset has been trying to enact it. When I became minister, the Budget Division told me that it should be used as a bargaining chip so that I can eventually take it out of the budget as part of a compromise. I got into the matter and spent hours on end studying this. I told them, 'No way; we are going to have it passed. This is the right thing to do, and we have to legislate it.'"

Q: But you are going to hurt the revenues of strong municipalities that know how to use the infrastructure at their disposal, like Tel Aviv.

"But who built this infrastructure? The state. Tel Aviv is Tel Aviv not because of Mayor Ron Huldai. If you put Huldai in Dimona, Dimona would not become Tel Aviv because it is not on the sea and it is not in central Israel. And above all, the state has not invested hundreds of billions of shekels in Dimona over the years on infrastructure."

Q: The budget doesn't tackle the cost of living that much.

"We have bolstered the disposable income Israelis have in a significant way by expanding negative income tax eligibility, by giving work allowances to those who get lower pay, and by increasing tax breaks for those who have children. The reform in the meat industry increases the maximum period in which you can sell frozen goods from 80 days to 120 days – like in the rest of the world. This will increase imports. The budget gives more in direct subsidies and we do not hurt farmers. Imports have been down because measures that were supposedly against pests created barriers. The budget invests two billion shekels (\$536 million) for the next four years in encouraging innovation so that more technology can be phased into service and thus agricultural output will increase."

Q: What about cracking down on monopolies? What happened to that bill?

"That bill was not fully honed. We have received many inquiries from small manufacturers who have to rely on large distribution networks because they cannot get direct access to supermarkets. We are going to set up next week a committee that is similar to what they did to the banks, and in three months we will get recommendations. The main thing we have proved in this budget is that I am not beholden to anyone and I have the guts – and the ability – to fight over this. We are going to pull up our sleeves to tackle centralization and monopolies.

"As a right-winger who espouses a free market, I don't want to intervene but as a government, our goal is to create conditions for real competition, and that is why we have to break up monopolies that have been built over decades. These are monopolies that have been built under the auspices of the law with regulatory worlds that have been ultimately serving them, the strong actors. These are powerful forces. A beverage corporation has become the owner of a media outlet.

These companies invest hundreds of millions of shekels in advertising. I have no doubt that I will have a difficult fight ahead. We will start with the food, and then move on to big pharma and other sectors that are centralized and we will open them up to competition."

Q: Do you believe prices will start coming down during your term?

"The answer is yes. Absolutely. We will promote decentralization and the lifting of regulatory barriers. Look at Carrefour. It sells some 5,000 products across Europe, but only 1,000 in Israel because it has to go through so much red tape, like the Via Dolorosa."

Q: You passed an increase for the allowances given to Haredim in yeshivot and you added more funding to Haredi institutions that don't teach the core curriculum, defying the advisors in the Finance Ministry and most of the economists.

"That is correct. Let me say upfront that we have maintained the preferred status of the state educational system, and we continue to prioritize incentives to teach core curriculum subjects. There are some institutions that get only 55% of the funding because they teach only 55% of the core curriculum. This criterion was set more than 20 years ago. Over the years, due to various pay benefits and after-school programs and so forth, the 100% rose to 200%, but the 55% stayed in place. So in effect, the 55% became 24%. Now we are just restoring it to its former size. This should be commended...I don't hide my views – I hold Torah study in high regard and I think this is an important value in a Jewish state. Those who are good at it will continue to do it, and those who are not will join the job market at a much earlier age. I know one thing: Coercion never worked and will never work. Those who think that what has failed for the past 75 years [will work] can do so until the cows come home; however right this stance may be, it is not a smart one."

Q: So you believe that increasing the funding for Haredi schools will not be a negative incentive for integrating Haredim in the job market, despite what your professional staff say?

"You must understand that that the opinion of those professionals [in the Budget Division] doesn't mean that all those billions in increases will cost us trillions in 2060, it just means that the new funding will cement the current trajectory we are already in. I believe this prediction is wrong. While there is no denying that one of the biggest challenges for the Israeli economy and for me as finance minister is to integrate populations into the job market, you have to keep in mind that the Haredi population has been undergoing a major transformation, including social changes and cultural shifts. There is no one quick fix.

"In the grand scheme of things, Haredi women do go out to work, Haredi men's

integration has been too slow but it's happening. I can't force them to enter professions that involve subjects they did not study in school. I don't think a hungry or poor boy will be more inclined to join the job market – the opposite is true. And we see this conclusion in every study on the matter: When a person has a better life, they open up to the world and want more, and this makes him integrate more."

Q: So the Budget Division was wrong?

"I think it is wrong, but I have a great working relationship with them. I like them and respect them. I never stop them from issuing their analysis papers, since I am a real democrat. But eventually, I have to decide. And it is my prerogative and my duty."

Q: You really think your approach will help integrate Haredim?

"I have a conceptual disagreement with them. I come from a constituency that does serve and integrates in the job market. But I also know how to admire the Haredi dedication to Torah study and their willingness to pay a price for it, to live a simple life in poverty, and to admire the large families and their dedication to good deeds and mutual assistance and care."

Smotrich does eventually concede in the interview that over the long run, Israel has to make changes if it wants to see a bright socioeconomic future. "I know that they know," he says, "that something has to be done on the sidelines."

Q: Can you understand why those who do not see Torah study the same way don't want to subsidize yeshiva students and that this has an adverse economic effect on Israelis? What is your answer to those who say that the state prefers to give yeshiva students stipends but not university students?

"These are not stipends. They just retroactively get more funding due to the increase in funding for Haredi institutions. A student in the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design costs the state some 38,000 shekels (USD 10,000) a year. We subsidize this. We subsidize students who major in gender studies and the arts. We invest in them. A normal country invests in the arts, in humanities, in arts. If everything is viewed through an economic prism, then let's fund only those faculties that are conducive to the economy's productivity. I am not dismissive of the humanities or Bezalel, but what's the contribution to the economy in having students throw paint on the wall and call it art? Those who want to pursue gender studies should pay for it, why should we fund it? Because that is what a normal country does. If I give Habima – the national theater – 50 million shekels (\$14 million) and fund cinema with tens of millions of shekels, then I can also fund other values. The funding for yeshivot is much lower. The yeshivot get some 2 billion shekels (\$530,000) a year, and the Council for Higher Education gets 13.5 billion (\$3.6 billion). Can you tell me how much of that really goes into the

sciences and how much goes into the humanities? That's fine, I am for this; woe to us if we do not fund culture and sports, but if we do all this – I can also give two billion shekels to yeshivot because they are a key part of society for those sitting in the government. We fund the general public the most; the Haredim get only a little portion."

Q: But when an Israeli looks at the distribution of Coalition funds, they see the government's values, not his own. It all goes to the religious, the Haredim, and to the settlements.

"That is not true. We increased budgets across the board, in all fields. Only one percent of the budget actually reflects the government's values, that is what democracy is all about. I wanted to give funds to the Oppositions's causes as well, and even set aside part of the budget for that. I told them, 'Let's have a proper discussion, give me some causes,' but they decided to shout and fight rather than take what I was offering. So we are funding pro-family projects with several million shekels, what's so bad about that? I'm not ashamed of that. These are my values. I got seven seats in the election, I too have the right to promote my causes under the auspices of democracy."

Smotrich quips that he would like *Israel Hayom* to make "two thirds of the interview about economics," in what is a telling example of how he wants to avoid talking about the government infighting as manifested in the fissures in his relations with Otzma Yehudit leader Itamar Ben-Gvir and the Haredi parties.

Q: Ben-Gvir has accused you of giving handouts to your friends and forgetting about the Negev and the Galilee. The Haredim wanted more funding, but you adamantly refused at first. Is that how the system works? simple extortion?

"You overdramatize everything. These are things every finance minister has to experience. The coalition agreements were initially about 70 billion shekels in total but I insisted on limiting them to 12.5 billion, and then we added a few billions. This came along with spending cuts because I refused to break this limit. It was actually Itamar, for whom I have a lot of respect, who got the best treatment when it comes to the coalition agreements. I think he launched a cynical campaign on the backs of the Negev and the Galilee. The budget has billions of shekels for those two areas. To say that there is not enough money just because some ministry that is held by your party is untruthful, unfair, and non-collegial."

Q: But this has become a pattern – the Haredim and Ben-Gvir made threats and got what they wanted, and this was not the first time that Ben-Gvir boycotted the government.

"Threats must be out of the question. This government is good for the Right and

for the Israelis. The alternative is to have the Left partner with the enemies and supporters of terrorism. That is why we have to make sure the government stays in power. Boycotting votes must be out of the question and I think that on this issue, Itamar was gravely wrong and everyone says so. He wanted more funds, and that's fine, but I hope he doesn't boycott again."

Q: In light of all these tensions, is it safe to say that you and Ben-Gvir won't run on the same list next time around when there is a Knesset election?

"There is so much time left before a general election is held: three and a half years. I have tremendous respect for Itamar and we have a great professional relationship. We made sure the budget supports his programs so that he succeeds in the important task he has taken upon himself. We ran together on the same list for a tactical reason. The fact that Otzma Yehudit and Religious Zionism are two separate parties is not new. Will they once again stand for election as a technical bloc? You can ask me in three and a half years.

Smotrich says he has "daily, and close" contact with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu every day. He says they are in lockstep on economic issues as well. He further stresses that there is no basis for the rumors that he threatened to resign during the budget talks. Now that the budget is over, the judicial reform appears to be heading back to the forefront.

Q: S&P decided to keep Israel's credit rating in place because the reform was put on hold. The protests are waning. Are you now going to put it back on the table?

"The credit rating agencies didn't cite the reform; they cited the uncertainty that has been created due to irresponsible elements that were willing to take down the house with them, who went to those agencies and asked to take down the rating and scare off investors based on lies on the reforms. You ask me if I am willing to capitulate to those who want to hurt the economy and threaten to drill a hole in the ship because they don't like the democratic choices? I will not do that, because if I do, we could just end the story called Israel and close the book on democracy. We were elected – and not by a thin margin – based on a clear judicial platform and I am saying this outright: The process of judicial reform has been set in motion and cannot be rolled back. Had State Party leader Benny Gantz looked at this through a rational prism, we would have already reached an understanding but the Opposition has no interest in reaching that point and creating calm; they just want to engage in dialogue for the sake of dialogue. As far as they are concerned, this is just a pastime."

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