Netanyahu's Security Policy Criticized

By JOSHUA MITNICK

TEL AVIV—A former Israeli security chief issued a scathing attack on Benjamin Netanyahu's foreign-policy record, accusing the prime minister of strengthening Hamas and neglecting an opportunity to make peace with Mahmoud Abbas.

The remarks of Yuval Diskin, who retired 18 months ago from the Shin Bet internal secret security service, come as Mr. Netanyahu heads into the homestretch of an election campaign in which he has been virtually unchallenged on foreign affairs and national security and is an overwhelming favorite for re-election.

Mr. Diskin, whose criticism was often highly personal, is part of group of ex-security chiefs to publicly call out Mr. Netanyahu, and he is one of six former Shin Bet leaders featured in an Israeli documentary film, "The Gatekeepers," which began showing in local cinemas a week ago and criticizes decades of policies toward the Palestinians.

The remarks come one week after Israeli President Shimon Peres broke with the customary nonpolitical role of his ceremonial office, and prodded the government to pursue peace talks with Mr. Abbas.

But the Shin Bet former director's remarks carry extra weight because he served as the government's point man for maintaining daily security, providing intelligence, and giving strategic advice on the situation in the Palestinian territories.

In a lengthy interview published in the weekend section of the daily Yedioth Ahronot, Mr. Diskin said that Mr. Netanyahu’s declared support for the two state solution amounted to "kalam fadi"—Arabic for empty words.

In response to the interview, an official in the prime minister's office said the remarks were baseless, recycled, politically motivated and stemmed from frustration Mr. Diskin wasn't appointed as chief of the Mossad.

Mr. Diskin's assessment marked a blunt departure from Mr. Netanyahu's assertions that Mr. Abbas is primarily to blame for the impasse in the peace process by insisting on the precondition of a settlement freeze and seeking unilateral diplomatic gains through a November resolution upgrading the status of the Palestinians at the United Nations.

Mr. Diskin came to the defense of Mr. Abbas, saying he is genuine in desiring a...
peace accord and accused the prime minister of deliberately weakening the Palestinian leader.

He warned that the combination of the current negotiations freeze with continued settlement expansion by Israel had left the Palestinians seeing only a "dead end," which has created combustible conditions for a new Palestinian uprising in the West Bank.

He also declared that Israel's recent war in Gaza against Hamas had strengthened the Islamic militant rulers of the Gaza Strip.

The former Shin Bet director also undermined assertions made by Mr. Netanyahu political allies that Mr. Abbas's reluctance to accept an Israeli peace offer in 2008 is evidence that the Palestinians prefer not to cut a deal.

Mr. Diskin said Mr. Abbas didn't respond to former prime minister Ehud Olmert's peace offer because he feared Mr. Olmert was too politically unpopular to conclude a deal.

"We are making Abu Mazen weaker every day, and believe this is a success," he said, referring to Mr. Abbas by his nickname. "And the most absurd thing: If we look at the situation over the years, one of the key people who contributed to the rise in Hamas's strength is Bibi Netanyahu."

Last year, former Mossad Chief Meir Dagan criticized Mr. Netanyahu over aggressive policies toward Iran, and suggested that potential regional fallout and damage from an Israeli pre-emptive attack against Tehran would overshadow any benefit from a direct hit. Former IDF chief Gabi Ashkenazi has also voiced concern over Iran.

Mr. Diskin in April criticized Mr. Netanyahu for "messianism" in his handling of Iran, which Israel accuses of developing a nuclear weapon. In the newspaper interview, the former security chief said that the prime minister is guided by personal rather than professional motives in handling Iran.

Mr. Diskin's criticism of Mr. Netanyahu over Iran has helped sap support over the summer for an Israeli pre-emptive attack against Iranian nuclear targets.

It is unclear whether current criticism can erode the large lead enjoyed by Mr. Netanyahu and right-wing parties over rivals from the center and left, who until now have largely refrained from attacking him on national-security issues.

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