

THE LONGEVITY OF ISRAEL'S NEW GOVERNMENT: POTENTIAL NEW DIRECTION OR JUST A BRIEF INTERLUDE?

Alp Tanju

Program Director
Global Relations Forum

June 13, 2021 will likely be remembered in the coming years as one of the stranger milestones of Israel's political history – after 12 years in power, Benjamin Netanyahu's long-running and often controversial reign as Prime Minister officially came to an end in favor of a broad coalition of political parties, diametrically opposed on a great deal of issues but united in their desire to oust him from power. The new rotational unity government, headed by former Netanyahu ally-turned-rival Naftali Bennett and a number of other opposition figures, has promised a new direction in tackling the country's woes, successfully navigate its COVID-19 response in the face of an emergent Delta variant, and hopefully maintain the coalition long enough so as to not subject the Israeli electorate to its fifth election cycle in the last three years.

That promise, however, faces several challenges before it can come to fruition, chief among them being the makeup of the government itself. Approved by an incredibly thin margin of 60-59 at the Knesset, the Israeli Parliament, the coalition contains the most widespread and ideologically incompatible political parties in Israeli history. From far-right parties to center-left ones, and even the first Israeli-Arab political party to come into power, this volatile mix of anti-Netanyahu alliances has puzzled international observers and raised questions about its long-term viability. Therefore, it bears looking into just how much of a political oddity the new Bennett-Lapid rotational government is, their initial policy priorities, and its likelihood of success.

Who is in the Coalition?

Naftali Bennett –

Sworn in as Prime Minister for the first half of the rotational government on June 13, 2021, Naftali Bennett was one of the most crucial players in the recent election and an ultimately unsurprising addition in the fight against ousting Netanyahu. Although he had listed his reasons for joining the coalition as wanting to end the electoral crisis of

the past few years, Bennett's aspirations to become Prime Minister were as well-known as his rivalry with former PM Benjamin Netanyahu. Netanyahu's former Chief of Staff and close ally until their falling out in 2008, Bennett first joined the ultra-nationalist and conservative The Jewish Home party, then became leader of a right-wing religious Zionist coalition of parties named Yamina (*'Rightwards'*) in 2019. Although Yamina only held 6 seats in the Knesset at the time of the latest election, Bennett's support for the emerging anti-Netanyahu coalition was critical in their ultimate success.

Naftali Bennett is a self-described ultra-nationalist whose views skew 'to the right of Netanyahu' on a number of issues. He has been one of the biggest proponents of illegal Jewish settlements in occupied Palestinian territories, is religiously conservative and vehemently opposes a two-state solution in the Israel-Palestine conflict. He is also just as hostile to Iran as his predecessor was.

Yair Lapid –

The leader of the centrist Yesh Atid (*'There Is A Future'*) party, Yair Lapid technically held the biggest number of seats in the Knesset with 17, but still had to ally with a number of other opposition parties during the last election and enter into a power-sharing leadership arrangement with Bennett. Currently acting as Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lapid will take over the position of Prime Minister from Bennett in 2023, provided the coalition can survive until then. He is seen as a centrist and secularist figure who, while not necessarily left-wing, has advocated against many of Netanyahu's right-wing policies when it comes to Palestine, foreign affairs, etc.

Benny Gantz –

Gantz holds the unique position of having been a part of Israel's previous rotational government just a year ago with someone he ideologically opposed and would rather see defeated. Leader of the centrist Blue and White alliance of political parties, Gantz was once seen as the best hope for getting rid of Netanyahu until his party underperformed in the elections at March 2, 2020, and had to enter into a coalition with Netanyahu's Likud party to prevent another round of elections, alienating a sizeable portion of his support base in the process. A former head of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) before joining politics, Gantz' views on anti-corruption measures, healthcare, and negotiating with the Palestinian Authority to find a peaceful resolution to the conflict with Palestine makes him one of the more left-wing figures in the coalition. However, as he was also in charge of the Israeli response during the recent outbreak of hostilities between Israel and Hamas in May of this year, his popularity with Palestinians is at an all-time low. He remains as Minister of Defense in the Bennett-Lapid era.

Avigdor Lieberman –

As leader of the secular nationalist Yisrael Beiteinu (*'Israel Is Our Home'*), Lieberman's new position as Minister of Finance in the new coalition will make him responsible for the country's economic recovery after COVID-19. A political wildcard, Lieberman has

in the past allied with and campaigned against Netanyahu in equal measure, while managing to play the role of a 'kingmaker' in almost every major election since 2019. Yisrael Beiteinu's stance in supporting a two-state solution while advocating for the ultra-Orthodox Jewish minority likely means that Lieberman may clash with his other coalition partners.

Mansour Abbas –

Perhaps the biggest winner of the most recent elections, Abbas has managed to secure his pro-Palestinian United Arab List party as the first Israeli-Arab political party to be in government. As Deputy Prime Minister of Arab Affairs, Abbas' priorities will likely be in expanding government spending to Palestinian towns and increasing the rights of Palestinians in Israel. Unsurprisingly, this puts Abbas in direct opposition with a majority of the coalition when it comes to issues related to the occupied Palestinian territories.

Others –

Joining the major players of the coalition government are several left-wing parties such as the Israel Labour Party and Meretz, with Labour leader Merav Michaeli acting as Minister of Transportation and Nitzan Horowitz of Meretz being appointed to the highly-important position of Minister of Health in charge of COVID-19 recovery. Former Likud member Gideon Sa'ar, who broke away last year and started his own party with Tikva Hadasha (*'New Hope'*) is now Minister of Justice, which will put him in an interesting position as the head overseer of former PM Netanyahu's ongoing corruption trial.

Initial Policy Priorities

As expected, the newly-formed coalition government has so far chosen to mostly focus on internal issues and post-pandemic recovery in an effort to avoid fracturing over contentious ones like the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

On dealing with COVID-19, the new coronavirus cabinet decided to increase testing measures at the borders and vaccination for teenagers in order to prepare for the inevitable Delta variant, as well as introducing fines for Israeli citizens traveling to and from blacklisted countries. As vaccinations are underway and existing COVID-19 cases continue to drop in the country, the main focus of this government will likely be balancing gradual normalization with safeguarding against the spread of the Delta variant.

Infrastructure and economic recovery have also been a focal point of the new government. Israel has been without an official budget since 2018, with the most recent attempt at passing one ending in the splintering of the Netanyahu-Gantz rotational government. This time around, coalition members have agreed to draft a budget within 140 days which is expected to be finalized by September. Minister of Finance

Lieberman has stated that while its full effects won't likely be felt until 2022, the new budget will not include tax hikes. Additionally, unity projects such as forming a commission to investigate the stampede at Mount Meron on April 30, 2021 (where 45 Israelis died after getting trampled) has been met with broad approval.

Bennett has also taken steps to improve relations with its close partner the US. After years of Netanyahu's close relationship with former US President Donald Trump and his dim view of Biden as an extension of his past disagreements with former President Barack Obama, Bennett has reassured President Biden that a reset of US-Israel relations will be beneficial for both sides. Although the two administrations do not see eye to eye on a number of issues ranging from Israeli settlements and Iran, neither has the political clout to commit to a firm stance and risk alienating the other. Bennett has also shown that his government is willing to approach these issues through coalition-building rather than his predecessor's more aggressive stance. Nevertheless, Bennett still formally opposes President Biden's goals of reviving the Iran Nuclear Deal and the recent election of hardliner Ebrahim Raisi as Iran's next President may threaten this spirit of cooperation in the coming months should Iran and Israel once again find themselves on a collision course.

On Turkey, the new government has a more difficult but still tangible road to improving relations. Personal issues between President Erdoğan and former PM Netanyahu, as well as the Netanyahu government's aggressive stance towards Palestinians, were major roadblocks in developing better relations. With Netanyahu gone and the new government containing pro-Palestinian parties like the United Arab List party, strengthening diplomatic ties with Turkey remains a possibility should there be a period of calm on the Palestine issue. Similarly, Turkey has found itself increasingly boxed in diplomatically after the passing of the Abraham Accords, and is interested in pursuing a more productive relationship with Israel. So far, no major moves have been made by either country and things are not expected to change in the short-term, but both have tangible reasons to normalize relations. Nevertheless, economic and commercial ties will continue.

Regarding the Israel-Palestine front, the new government's initial moves have been more mixed. On the one hand, Netanyahu's big annexation project into Palestinian lands in the West Bank from 2020 seems to be on hold for now as a result of Israel's commitment as part of the Abraham Accords with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. However, both PM Bennett and Minister of Justice Gideon Sa'ar have previously stated that annexation remains a strategic goal for Israel. Further developments on this front threaten to break up the coalition before it has barely begun to get its feet off the ground.

Yet another troubling development has been the brief skirmish between Hamas and Israeli forces in response to PM Bennett giving authorization for a far-right Israeli march to occur just days into the new government's tenure. Hamas' deployment of

incendiary balloons over the walls as response was met with airstrikes from Israel, risking the ceasefire that occurred this past May after weeks of violence. While it appears that nothing has ultimately come out of the exchange this time, further provocations from either side might reignite sectarian violence between Israelis and Palestinians and force a governmental fracture.

A Question of Longevity

While the Bennett-Lapid government has so far managed to complete its first month in power with a relatively smooth record, there are still plenty of reasons to suspect its long-term survivability. Lingering anti-Netanyahu sentiment and the ongoing threat of COVID-19 has thus far managed to keep the different parties united under the same banner, but this state of being cannot last. Now the main opposition candidate, Benjamin Netanyahu has already begun accusing the coalition of forming a 'left-wing' government that will cede power to the Palestinians and Iran while also gathering his forces to challenge Bennett and Lapid in the next election. He may not have to wait that long; Netanyahu is still hugely popular among conservatives, and all it takes for Bennett is to lose the backing of either his right-wing allies or left-wing coalition partners for the government to fall apart and have no choice but to call another snap election.

The true test of the new government will likely come after September, when certain developments such as budget negotiations, Iran-Israel tensions, the potential damage of the Delta coronavirus variant, and further issues regarding Palestinian territories start increasing pressures on the coalition's willingness to set aside their individual policy priorities. As always, only time will tell whether this coalition of strange bedfellows will have a chance at building a better future for Israel. With the odds highly stacked against them, one cannot help but be reminded of the story of David and Goliath.