

# Government Formation in Israel:

## First Impressions

by [David Pollock \(/experts/david-pollock\)](/experts/david-pollock)

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Pollock \(/experts/david-pollock\)](/experts/david-pollock)

David Pollock is the Bernstein Fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on regional political dynamics and related issues.



### Brief Analysis

**A**s Israel's new prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, presents his government to the Knesset, the international community is still searching for indications about his intentions. The incoming government's personnel and policy guidelines will be minutely scrutinized for clues. More intangible, but also more important, will be Netanyahu's own operating structure and style. Though much of the reportage so far concentrates on the purported problems that Israel's new posture will pose for the peace process, there are also some encouraging signs. As is often the case, the most important ones are in the telltale omissions, rather than in what is explicitly included on the new Israeli team's agenda.

**The Prime Minister's Power.** Netanyahu is clearly determined to project firm personal leadership, if necessary at the expense of senior figures more steeped in the ideology of his own political camp. In the immediate aftermath of the election, a few stiff statements from such quarters were quickly silenced by the prime-minister-elect's edict that only he was authorized to make policy pronouncements or meet with foreign dignitaries. Since then, as U.S. officials have noted with approval, such incidents have generally been conspicuous by their absence.

Institutionally, it appears that some rumored steps to consolidate power in the prime ministry (such as the creation of an American-style National Security Council, or the transfer of selected budgetary, communications, and other policymaking adjuncts from various other departments to Netanyahu's office) may not actually take place anytime soon. And the down-to-the-wire bargaining over cabinet posts for leading Likud figures demonstrates that party loyalties, not just the prime minister's personal preferences or pure professionalism, still count for a great deal in Israeli politics. Still, in policy and personnel terms alike, Netanyahu's early moves suggest a twofold drive: to assert his own authority, and in so doing, to be at least as responsive to the middle-of-the-road security and business establishments, with their vested interests in the peace process, as to his party apparatus.

**Government Makeup.** In the first two weeks after the election, a fair amount of media attention focused on the possibility of a National Unity Government that would include the Labor Party, with mixed signals about this option coming from all sides. While this is not now in the cards, the exclusion of the opposite end of the spectrum -- the two-member Moledet party, a partner in the last Likud-led coalition -- is a clear if often overlooked marker that this

government will not veer too far to the right. Also significant is that the religious parties, particularly the National Religious Party, demanded very little and got even less in the foreign policy field, for example on specific issues of Jewish settlement in the West Bank.

A similarly centrist tendency is emerging in Netanyahu's staffing of major government ministries, despite today's awkward last-minute hitches over Religious Affairs and over Likud veterans David Levy and Ariel Sharon. The appointment of moderates to two key cabinet posts -- Dan Meridor at Finance, and Ya'acov Ne'eman at Justice -- is striking evidence of a pragmatic as opposed to an ideological orientation. And in the security sphere, the two top posts will likewise be denied to veteran "strong men" of the right. Instead, the Defense Minister will be Yitzhak Mordechai, a popular but low-key political newcomer with a recently acquired reputation for restraint as a commander; and the Internal Security Minister will be Avigdor Kahalani, founder of the Third Way party who defected from Labor largely over his tough view of Syria, but who seems to have decidedly moderate views on the Palestinian track. Overall, Netanyahu will almost certainly be able to muster a majority of this cabinet for a comparatively non-confrontational course in Arab-Israeli negotiations.

Policy Positions. Almost forgotten in the current rush to analyze what's in the new government's guidelines is the long list of earlier commitments, conditions and qualifications that has been left out. There is no commitment to set up any new settlements -- only to develop the existing ones, which the Rabin and Peres governments also allowed to happen even as they pursued the Oslo accords. There is no wanton threat to reenter Palestinian Authority areas -- only a promise to fight terror everywhere, which again hardly goes beyond the Labor party's language on this point. There is no reference to new legislation, as several coalition partners reportedly requested, that would further restrict the government's room for maneuver, either on Jerusalem or on the Golan Heights. There is no pledge of a protracted postponement of the Hebron pullout, a boycott of Yasser Arafat, or a closure of Orient House. And there is no enumeration of what specific commitments (e.g., on the PNC Charter, anti-Israel incitement, links with Hamas, etc.) the PA must fulfill in order to qualify as a worthy negotiating partner. Taken together, all these meticulous omissions point to a greater measure of continuity than change, at least on some key immediate issues. And that, in turn, provides hope of a breathing spell for regional diplomacy, while the larger implications of the shift in Israeli politics are sorted out. The devil may still be in the details, but the saving grace so far is in the details that aren't there.

In this fluid policy environment, much will depend on Arab signals toward the incoming Israeli government. Israel's new government will naturally be looking for proof that Arafat is continuing to clamp down on terrorism, not cooperate with it. The near-term quid pro quo, as Netanyahu implied in presenting his government to the Knesset today, will likely be a relaxation of Israel's closure policy, which he conceded had produced "economic suffocation" of Palestinians. Sustained security, he said, would allow "true partnership" with the Palestinian Authority -- a turn of phrase remarkably reminiscent of the rhetoric of Israel's outgoing administration.

> More broadly, with the first Arab summit since the Gulf crisis due later this week, Israel will be looking for at least a modicum of flexibility and goodwill. In that context, a prescription for paralysis would be to insist on dealing with all issues at once, on starting with non-starters, or on putting abstract principles into hasty diplomatic practice. Making "final status" issues like Palestinian statehood, or Jerusalem, or even "land for peace" litmus tests for the resumption of negotiations now -- when, according to the Oslo accords themselves, no agreement on them is due for another three years-- would only serve to complicate the chances for progress on more urgent issues, such as the next steps in the implementation of Oslo II.

A Possible Opening. A few weeks ago, as Operation Grapes of Wrath was underway, one Likud strategist privately conceded that the party had not yet fully formulated its own approach on the Lebanese front. Netanyahu's guarded statements at the time focused on the need to press Syria directly to ensure quiet on Israel's northern border; since

then, he has continued to hint at a limited arrangement with Syria on issues other than the Golan. The government's policy guidelines are intriguingly silent on the entire subject of Lebanon, suggesting a certain flexibility there that gains some credence from other fresh signals from both sides.

In just the past few days, without fanfare, Netanyahu reportedly decided to move forward in the Washington-based discussions on establishing a monitoring group, with Syrian participation, to help maintain the limited cease-fire in south Lebanon. Apparently in response, the controlled Syrian press immediately offered its one and only relatively open-minded assessment of Israel's new leadership. (Since then, unfortunately, it has already labeled Netanyahu's government program a "declaration of war against the peace process.") The Israeli press, meanwhile, has taken to speculating about a bold but conciliatory Israeli initiative in Lebanon -- possibly including a new conditional offer of withdrawal from the security zone. To be sure, such a step would confront daunting practical problems of appropriate security arrangements, not to mention the mix of positive and negative incentives required for Assad to reach even a tacit agreement of that kind in the first place. But this is nevertheless an area that would seem to warrant intensive further exploration as Secretary of State Christopher gets ready for another round of regional consultations next week.

David Pollock is scholar-in-residence at The Washington Institute, on leave from USIA. These views expressed above are his own and do not necessarily represent those of the U.S. government.

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