

# Netanyahu Era Likely Coming to an End Amid Post-Election Standoff

by [David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](#)

Oct 21, 2019

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/hd-ntnyahw-qd-ynthly-ly-alarjh-fy-khdm-azmt-ma-bd-alantkhabat\)](#) /

[Farsi \(/fa/policy-analysis/dr-myanh-bnbsst-psaantkhabaty-dwran-ntanyahw-ahtkala-rw-bh-payan-ast\)](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](#)

David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations.



Brief Analysis

---

**Three different scenarios could unfold in the coming weeks, but they all share one thing in common: Netanyahu would no longer dominate the political landscape the way he has over the past decade.**

It is now over a month since Israel held an unprecedented second round of inconclusive national elections, and the standoff continues. This week, barring unforeseen moves, President Reuven Rivlin will ask Blue and White Party leader Benny Gantz to form a government—the first time since 2006 that someone other than Binyamin Netanyahu has been asked to do so, and the second time this year that the incumbent prime minister has failed to assemble a coalition with a sufficient number of parliamentary seats. Netanyahu had been working at that task since the election but gave up earlier today. Whether Gantz will succeed in his own coalition bid is unclear, but current circumstances suggest that Netanyahu’s decade of dominating Israeli politics is likely coming to an end.

## COALITION MATH

As it stands, Gantz will not be able to put together a majority coalition of 61 seats in the 120-member Knesset unless he reaches some sort of accommodation with the Likud (the alliance of Arab parties that won 13 seats is staunchly opposed to a right-wing government but also refuses to join a Blue-White government, or any coalition government for that matter). Yet he still has the upper hand given Netanyahu’s two consecutive failures.

After winning the first election in April, Netanyahu could not gather more than 60 seats, leading him to disband the Knesset rather than give Rivlin the option of letting a rival try to form a government. In the September redo election, Netanyahu’s right-wing bloc diminished to 55 seats, while Blue-White edged Likud head-to-head 33 seats to 32. Accordingly, Gantz knew Netanyahu would be unable to put a government together when Rivlin gave him the first

crack at it.

Currently, former defense minister Avigdor Liberman remains the kingmaker. He has stated that he wants Blue-White and Likud to join forces with his Yisrael Beiteinu Party (which won 8 seats) and lock out smaller factions on the left and right. In recent years, ultraorthodox and settler parties have wielded disproportionate influence, and Liberman gained three more seats in September by appealing to voter resentment against those parties. He and Blue-White are now demanding that Likud separate from these right-wing allies (who won 23 seats) as a prerequisite for entering a national unity government. Netanyahu adamantly refuses, seeing this as a form of political disarmament.

Another obstacle is Blue-White's insistence that Likud find a new leader, since Netanyahu remains under a legal cloud amid widespread indications he will be indicted on three corruption allegations, possibly by the end of next month. Under Israeli law, a prime minister can remain in office if indicted, but any other cabinet minister in that situation must step down. Therefore, if Likud and Blue-White form a national unity government with a rotating premiership, Netanyahu will insist that he take the first rotation—not only to stay in office if indictments come through, but perhaps also to increase his leverage for a plea bargain. Whatever the case, his public statements make clear that he will not step aside for a Likud colleague at this juncture, and all of the party's senior officials have lined up behind him. In light of these factors, three scenarios seem most likely once Gantz takes the mandate this week.

## **SCENARIO 1: THE RIVLIN COMPROMISE**

**A**mid continued brinkmanship between the parties, Gantz may lean toward what has become known as the Rivlin compromise plan, which seeks to address the impasse surrounding Netanyahu's role. The plan involves amending the law whereby power is transferred to the prime minister's deputy for 100 days if he is incapacitated, as was the case when Ariel Sharon had a massive stroke in 2006. The law would be changed to extend beyond 100 days, and to cover situations where the prime minister is indicted.

If the parties agree to that compromise and form a unity government, Rivlin would give the first rotation to Netanyahu. As soon as he is indicted, however, authority would be transferred to his deputy, in this case Gantz. Netanyahu would retain the title of prime minister as permitted by the amended law, but Gantz would function as acting premier for the remaining portion of Netanyahu's rotation unless the courts fully clear him during that time. Gantz would then assume the office formally during the second two years of the unity government, potentially giving him control of the government for nearly four years in total.

Yet Blue-White's distrust of Netanyahu is so deep that party officials do not believe he would actually cede power if indicted. As evidence, they point to the fact that he approved the idea so quickly behind closed doors. Would he allow Blue-White to place ironclad enforcement mechanisms onto the deal? Or will the indictments coincide with these deal-making efforts, making a unity government without Netanyahu more likely?

## **SCENARIO 2: SHORT-TERM MINORITY GOVERNMENT**

**I**f Gantz does his best to form a coalition with Likud but fails, he may ask Liberman to abstain so that a minority Blue-White government can be established. This would be very difficult politically, since it would essentially be based on 44 seats (as mentioned previously, the Arab parties will not join a Blue-White government; at best, their 13 seats will provide a safety net against no-confidence motions). Although such a small minority government is unprecedented, Gantz would presumably explain to Liberman that it is a short-term measure based on the hope that public pressure will force Netanyahu to step aside for another Likud candidate once indictments are issued. Netanyahu's aides are already trying to stave off this possibility by making entreaties to the right flank of Blue-White, led by former defense minister Moshe Yaalon.

One low-probability scenario is that Gantz will recruit Liberman and one of the ultraorthodox parties to form a

government with 61 seats. Yet this would violate Liberman's pledge not to sit with ultraorthodox parties, not to mention the ultraorthodox pledge to avoid a government that Netanyahu does not head.

## SCENARIO 3: THIRD ROUND OF ELECTIONS

As he inaugurated the Knesset's fall session, Rivlin publicly chided parliamentarians for the ongoing impasse and warned them not to inflict the country with another redo election. Yet as Gantz and Netanyahu battle to convince Israelis who is responsible for what the nightly news calls "the political quagmire," the possibility of going back to the polls cannot be ruled out.

Going forward, Gantz will likely emphasize that Netanyahu is being unreasonable for insisting on leading a government when he is under a legal cloud, for demanding to go first in a rotating premiership, and for refusing to let Likud join a government without its right-wing allies. In contrast, Gantz has said he would form a unity government with Likud instantly once Netanyahu steps aside. And if Netanyahu or his allies call for another round of voting, Gantz would likely dismiss the threat as a hollow one given the prime minister's loss of support between rounds one and two. For his part, Netanyahu will likely argue that Gantz is being unreasonable by not allowing him to go first in the rotation.

## CONCLUSION

Although it is too soon to say which of the above scenarios will emerge, all of them share one trait in common: Netanyahu would no longer dominate the political landscape the way he has over the past decade. As he returns the mandate to Rivlin, his realistic options are largely limited to blocking Gantz rather than retaining full authority for himself. These scenarios also hint at Israel's broader transition away from a personally centralized power structure and toward some sort of power-sharing model.

Whatever the case, it is difficult to imagine the existing caretaker government taking any major initiatives before the new government is formed, apart from tactical military strikes in response to potential Gaza rocket attacks. Likewise, the Trump administration seems to be waiting for Israel's political landscape to settle before deciding whether to undertake its long-awaited peace initiative, or perhaps recast it as a less-ambitious "vision statement" to be used as a reference point for future peace efforts. For now, there is no indication that Trump and Netanyahu have spoken with each other since the September election, and when senior advisor Jared Kushner visits the region at the end of the month, he will meet with Gantz for the first time, not just with Netanyahu.

*David Makovsky is the Ziegler Distinguished Fellow and director of the Project on Arab-Israel Relations at The Washington Institute, and coauthor with Dennis Ross of the book [Be Strong and of Good Courage: How Israel's Most Important Leaders Shaped Its Destiny](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/be-strong-and-of-good-courage-how-israels-most-important-leaders-shaped-its-destiny) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/be-strong-and-of-good-courage-how-israels-most-important-leaders-shaped-its-destiny>). ❖*

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## [Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## [Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

## [Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

### TOPICS

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](#)

[Peace Process \(/policy-analysis/peace-process\)](#)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Israel \(/policy-analysis/israel\)](#)

