

New Leadership for Israel? A Conversation with Gideon Saar

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Gideon Saar is a Tel Aviv-born Israeli politician. He is founder and head of Israel's New Hope party.



Brief Analysis

The New Hope party leader and former Likud minister discusses why he is running in Israel's March election, how his policies differ from Netanyahu's, and what his approach will be on key issues such as the Middle East peace process and the Iranian nuclear challenge,

On February 10, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Gideon Saar. The following is a transcript of his conversation with Institute executive director Robert Satloff, lightly edited for grammar.

Robert Satloff: Hello everyone, I am Rob Satloff, the director of The Washington Institute, and I am delighted to welcome people from all over the world to this special conversation we are having with the head of the New Hope party in Israel, contender for the prime ministership of Israel, former member of Knesset, Gideon Saar. I know that we already have visitors on this conversation from countries around the Middle East, as I have already received questions to factor into this conversation from Egypt, from Morocco, from Sudan, from all over! So, this is quite the opportunity.

Just a word about our guest. Gideon Saar, fifty-four years old, born in Tel Aviv, grew up in Sde Boker, Ben-Gurion's kibbutz, where his father was a physician. He found a political home, though, at the other side of the spectrum, in the Likud. He rose up to the most senior levels of the Likud, serving as minister of education and minister of interior in different Likud-led governments, and was the top-ranked person on the Likud list after the prime minister. He took a timeout from politics, then eventually returned, ran for the Likud leadership, was not successful, and eventually opted to create his own party, New Hope, which is running in this, the fourth Israeli election in the last two years. It is appropriate that we have just celebrated in America Groundhog Day, the day where things keep repeating. For the fourth time in two years, we are having a repetition of this parliamentary exercise in Israel. One of the new innovations in this election is the candidacy of Gideon Saar and the presence of his new party.

The purpose of today's conversation is to afford Mr. Saar a platform to introduce himself to Washington, although he is a well-known figure among those of us that follow Israeli politics closely—to have a conversation about why he is running for prime minister, what his ideas are, and what prospects a government led by him and New Hope will have for Israel, for America, and for the broader region. So it is a real delight, Gideon, to welcome you to this conversation.

Gideon Saar: Thank you, Rob, and thank you for the invitation. I am glad to be with you today. I visited your Institute a couple years ago, and I hope to be there soon. But now, we must do this through Zoom, unfortunately, given the circumstances. I am happy to be with you.

Satloff: I am delighted that you can join us. So let's begin with the obvious question, if it's alright Gideon: why run for prime minister? What makes you ready, worthy, and able to serve as prime minister of the state Israel?

Saar: You in America, you have two elections within four years. We now are in the fourth election campaign in two years. I think we are at an all-time height in terms of instability. We must, today, work in order to restore stability and to bring about unity to our nation. This is my mission. The current prime minister failed in bringing back stability even though he led a seventy-something coalition in the Knesset, a national unity government that was supported in the public and in the Knesset itself quite widely. But unfortunately, he preferred his interests over the good of the country, as I see it. Therefore, we needed to create change in Israel. That is what I am trying to do now. I have enough experience—this is my seventh Knesset. I was a two-time cabinet secretary. I served, as you said, as a minister in the most important portfolios and I led significant reforms then. Mainly, I put Israel first, which is the most important thing today. This is why change is needed, and this is why I think that I can do it.

Satloff: In this unusual political moment, I have to ask you, on what policy matters do you see yourself differentiating yourself from the incumbent? Or is this, as much as anything else, a referendum on the incumbent?

Saar: I believe that today, the main challenges of Israel are domestic. Unfortunately, no one is dealing with them right now. I am speaking about bringing back stability, which is not only political stability and influence, of course but economic stability, social stability. I think today, it is extremely important to unite the nation again and to try to break this circle of ongoing election campaigns. It is of course extremely important to restore our economy after a very difficult year of the coronavirus crisis. It is a huge challenge for us to improve our education system and bring [it] to be one of the leading education systems in the world. I believe we have the human resources to do that. We must restore also our governance in all parts of the land, which is something we are not doing, unfortunately, today. I believe these domestic challenges that were neglected in the last [several] years should be dealt with as a first priority after the formation of the new government. In terms of our relations with the U.S., we must restore the principle [of] bipartisan support in America, and we must also work with all segments of American civil society. I think these are the urgent things that a new government in Israel should deal with.

Satloff: Gideon, you grew up in the Likud. You were a leader of the Likud. What happened to the party? Why a new party? What does New Hope stand for ideologically that is different than what the Likud stands for?

Saar: We faced a situation, and unfortunately, we are facing a situation, where a cult of personality came instead of principles and values. I prefer to be loyal to the values and principles that brought me to the Likud in the first place. Today, the most important thing is to see, in the Likud, what Netanyahu's interest is and to fit yourself into this paradigm. This is not what the Likud was in the past, unfortunately. The New Hope party is a center-right party, which is a party that is committing itself to unite the nation, which has become very important in Israel today. The Likud, as its name says, should unite the nation. But unfortunately, if you ask Israelis today, regardless of differences of opinion, very few people will say that Likud, under the leadership of Netanyahu, can unite the people.

Satloff: Let me pursue this question of unity. It is a question that we talk about a lot in America. It was the theme of Joe Biden's inaugural address. Let me ask you in the Israeli context: to achieve unity, how does a party which has a strong ideological bent, which you suggest New Hope has, how do you create a coalition that would span all of the parties that want new leadership in Israel, when the ideology could go from center-left all the way over to even further right than you are?

Saar: First of all, in our system, we deal with coalitions after we have passed the elections. We still have forty-one days to go, that is a lot of time. But I can tell you, Rob, that I know I will have to work hard in order to reach over differences between different people, between different parties. Today, when we are talking about the reality that the corona crisis created in Israel, but not only in Israel, it is not only possible, I think it is something we must do. The things that we will have to take care of—to create new jobs, to restore our economy, to build ourselves again

after this crisis—are not things which are in ideological dispute among different parties. So, I think it is possible to reach over these kinds of gaps and I think it is also necessary today.

In addition to that, I think, is that a new government shouldn't rely on extremists. In order to have, now, a stable government, we need a government that will not rely on extremists. This will be a heavy task, but I believe it is a possible task. If Netanyahu won't have sixty-one members in order to form any coalition, I think we will have more than one option to form an alternative coalition, and this is definitely what we will try to do after the election.

Satloff: A moment ago, you made reference to Israel's struggle with the coronavirus, which of course all countries are wrestling with. Netanyahu is running on a platform in which he makes a claim that Israel will be the first country to defeat COVID through mass vaccination. Is this a reasonable claim in your view?

Saar: First of all, Netanyahu announced at least two times in the past, the last time was about a month ago, that coronavirus belongs to the past and we won. But the truth is we are far from winning this battle. There are still huge, huge problems that we are facing these days. It is not a simple situation, not from the health point of view, not from the point of view of the economy. I think it requires a sense of humility. We still do not know a lot about the virus, about different mutations. We see the vaccination process is going well, but still we don't see that we have passed in terms of the people in hospitals and so on and so forth. We are still not over the crisis. So, I would say Israelis are satisfied from the progress in the vaccination process. But Israelis don't think this government has succeeded in managing the crisis, not at all. We have had a lot of issues from failure in enforcement of the law, failure to check those people who came from abroad through our one international airport, which was in huge failure for almost one year. People are not satisfied with the way the government hasn't worked enough so that the kids are able to go to school, and so on and so forth. I would say we shouldn't celebrate before the whistle.

Satloff: Let's ask about a couple foreign policy issues that touch on the interests of many of our viewers, Gideon. You're on record as opposing the creation of a Palestinian state. What is your rationale? What is your preferred alternative? How do you think this will factor into your relations with Washington in the event you eventually become Prime Minister Saar?

Saar: First of all, the rationale is following the experience we had. And not only during the last three decades with attempts to solve the conflict with this kind of slogan, "two states for two nations." But also, as you know, Mr. Barak and Mr. Olmert offered very generous suggestions, but the Palestinians never accepted them and made it clear that they are not in a situation of willingness to solve this crisis with us. Even if we look back further—to the days before the formation of our state, to the Peel Commission, to the partition resolution of the UN—this idea was at the center of the conflict for more than eighty years, but it always failed. It is a question of whether it is realistic, if such a state is viable at all. How can we implement the idea with two separate Palestinian entities with two different regimes?

Satloff: In the West Bank and Gaza?

Saar: Yes. How can we protect the security of the citizens of Israel with a sovereign state in the heart of our land, a few miles from the most populated areas in our country? We had the experience of the withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. We uprooted all civil and military presence in the Gaza Strip. Since then, we did not get more stability and security, we got less. Those that were speaking about the demilitarization of an evacuated territory found out that it is not simple at all to do that, and if you want to do that, you can achieve that only with huge bloodshed. It will not last for a very long time. So all of these questions put huge question marks over the realistic confidence in this idea.

One thing is quite clear: we took steps, the Oslo Accords, the creation of the Palestinian Authority in the '90s, and the decade afterward with the disengagement plan from Gaza—we went out from the populated Palestinian areas. They are today, the vast majority of the Palestinian population, they are not controlled by Israel. They are controlled by their own people, Hamas in the Gaza Strip and the PA in Judea and Samaria. On the ground, you had a creation of separation, de facto, on the ground. I would say I support the maximum autonomy of the Palestinians to rule their life with the minimum ability to harm the security of the state of Israel. This can be the formula.

I would say also, we need to find a regional component in the solution itself. I think that it is very important to combine our neighboring states, Jordan and Egypt, in the solutions themselves. I don't want to elaborate on the issue, but I think on certain issues we can have trilateral agreements: on tourism, the economy, the environment, and other issues. We must try to find an alternative with these two principles of separation and of autonomy without the ability to hurt our security, and a regional component.

With regard to relations with Washington DC, I believe we should have a sincere dialogue to see what is possible, what is realistic to achieve. Let's not forget that even during the two terms of President Obama, Palestinians didn't take advantage of the fact that they had a president who really had sympathy for their cause. Take these eight years, I think we didn't have even one year of effective negotiation between Israel and the PA. This can tell you something about the real motivation of the Palestinians. I would say we should have a sincere dialogue, find out what we can achieve, what pragmatic arrangements we can have progress with. I have certain ideas on these issues. I think that today, all the parties in the international community—and my impression is also the American administration, even though it supports the two-state solution as an idea—are much more realistic with regard to what we can achieve on the ground in the short term.

Satloff: Alright, very interesting. So, let me just ask you about two aspects of this equation you just outlined: separation, autonomy, regional component, dialogue with America. Let me ask you about two aspects of this. First, settlement ideas. You just advocated the idea of separation.

What impact does that principle have on what you would support or not support on further Israeli settlement within the West Bank, within Judea and Samaria?

Saar: I totally oppose evacuation of Jewish communities in Judea and Samaria. I think this idea belongs to the past. It was proven it was not contributing to stability, to peace. We must find out how to live together. I don't think to uproot communities, Jewish or Arab, is helpful to the cause of peace.

Satloff: Last year, the government of Israel made a decision when faced with two alternatives: the attraction of peace agreements with the Arab states, such as the UAE, and the appeal of annexation, extending Israeli sovereignty over parts of the West Bank. It chose to accept the Emirates' demand of suspending annexation in order to reach that agreement. Do you agree with that choice? Is that the sort of choice you would have made? How important to you is the idea of extending Israeli sovereignty in the territory?

Saar: First of all, that is the reality. I will not deny that I support the idea of implementing the Israeli law over our communities in Judea and Samaria. It is something that continues to be an Israeli objective. I am not speaking about the Palestinian populated areas, I am speaking about our communities. We have there a half of a million of our residents and they should live under the Israeli law. But, the prime minister, Netanyahu, committed himself in the dialogue with the American administration—the Trump administration at the time, which was a very friendly administration to Israel, and we are thankful for that—to suspend the idea of implementing our sovereignty for a couple of years.

As a prime minister of Israel, I will respect a commitment that was given by an Israeli prime minister to an American administration. As an Israeli prime minister, I would like to promote and to try together, with the new administration in Washington, to work on adding more states to the normalization process with Israel. I think that eventually, it can be very constructive for the cause of stability and peace, even though the PA was not happy about it, to say the least. But I think eventually, the idea of peace between Israelis and Arabs in the region, including the Palestinians, it will be constructive. So I would continue this process. I will respect the commitment given by the prime minister. But as an objective of Israel, I personally, and the majority of Knesset in my mind, still see it as an objective to implement the Israeli law over our communities in Judea and Samaria, not over the Palestinian populated areas there.

Satloff: More generally, how important is it to have these agreements with countries as far away as Morocco and Sudan? How does this fit into your own vision of Israel's national security?

Saar: I think it is important that we can see on the ground today that that the old Arab-Israeli conflict is eventually shrinking into a Palestinian-Israeli conflict. It is very important for the Palestinians themselves, [who] thought in the past they [could] lead with rejectionism without paying any kind of price, to finally understand that the region wants to go forward. Different countries now feel they can earn from cooperation, [with] economic ties between each other, and I think it is very good news for all people of the region.

Satloff: Lots of people who submitted questions were quite moved by your remark about the search for national unity and ask how you propose to build national unity. First, with the Arab Israeli community? Second, with the Haredi community, who seem so far out of the mainstream on such issues as even obeying COVID-19 regulations.

Saar: Both communities are an important challenge to be advanced. When we are speaking about Israeli Arabs, the challenge is integration. I think today we have more and more [Arab] Israeli citizens that feel they want to be integrated into the state and to have futures for their kids. They do not necessarily feel that the Joint Arab List, which got about 90 percent of the votes in the last elections, are representing their real interests...So, I think it is extremely important. And it depends on us more than to solve our conflict with the Palestinians. It is more in our hands to make progress in that respect.

In terms of the ultraorthodox community, we also have challenges. As the minister of education in the past, I promoted higher education. Among the ultraorthodox I opened educational [and] professional schools for students that dropped from the world of the Torah, from yeshiva. And I think we should do more in order to integrate them into the economic sector and in our society. I feel that there is a desire to do so here. Maybe not in every sector, but there are a lot of people that want to be integrated. I think I know how to do it. When I was minister of education I dealt, for example, with how we can create equal opportunities for the girls who are learning in the ultraorthodox system, in order that they will easily be integrated in higher education, and also in work.

Generally speaking, we have progress but we can have much more progress, and it is very important since these two segments of our society [are] very different from one another, but the common thing is that they are growing in terms of demography. So it is very important that they will be better integrated in our society and in our economy.

Satloff: The IDF chief of staff recently gave a very tough speech warning against diplomacy with Iran and actually raising, at least implicitly, the threat of military action against Iranian nuclear facilities. The U.S. is considering reengaging diplomatically with Iran. What is your view of what the chief of staff said, and what is your approach to addressing this extremely important security challenge for Israel?

Saar: I would say that what the IDF chief of staff, Mr. Kochavi, said was more or less the Israeli consensus on the issue of Iran. He brought his professional view on the matter, and I respect and support his professional view on the matter.

The United States and Israel have a common goal and a common interest to not let Iran possess nuclear weapons. And this is something that I

feel we have in common. We might have some differences on how we can achieve that goal. But the best thing is to speak directly and honestly on the issue because it is extremely important. It is not only an Israeli consensus. Today it is also a regional consensus in the Middle East, because if Iran gets a nuclear weapon, we will enter a nuclear race in the Middle East. This can be very, very dangerous, and different neighboring countries will not let themselves stay behind, they will want to get nuclear weapons as well. This will be very problematic in terms of regional stability.

So what would I like to do? If I will have the trust of the citizens of Israel and be elected to this important office of prime minister of Israel, [I would] have a sincere and effective dialogue with the American administration on how we can achieve this common goal. It is not only an Israeli goal. I believe it is something which is also in the national security of the U.S. And it [does] not undermine the things that Israel can do as a sovereign state. Israel has a history of protecting ourselves from nuclear threats. We have done it in the past in Iraq, we have done it in the past in Syria. But there is no doubt that it is extremely important to try and do our utmost to find a common language, not only about the objective, but also about how to address it. And to come to these talks with really good will.

During the last [few] years, Iran very openly did not respect the JCPOA. [Iran] violated it and they continue to violate it today—with regard to the enrichment process, Iran has been threatening to throw international inspectors out even though they're not letting them inspect. Also, during that time there were other aspects with Iran like spreading terror in the region and developing its missile program. I believe these new facts will also be considered in Washington. And what we have seen from the Iranians, also from the day that Biden took office, is that they are only putting preconditions and making all kinds of provocations. It is clear that they are not working with goodwill, but trying to achieve unilateral achievements, which I think is not in the interest of the United States to give them.

Satloff: You just mentioned the period in which Joe Biden has been serving as president. It is only a few weeks and we only have a few data points to look at. There have been some interesting and important statements regarding policy toward Israel and the Middle East, such as the affirmation of the embassy staying in Jerusalem; the statement about Israel staying on the Golan, but hesitancy to recognize sovereignty on the Golan; and a statement of great concern about the International Criminal Court and its announcement that it will formally open an investigation regarding Israel. When you put all these and some other statements together, do you have a view already of how the new administration is shaping up in terms of its approach to your country?

Saar: I think the approach that the secretary of state showed on the issue of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel was positive. And we might see some differences on the issue, with what he said with regard to sovereignty on the Golan, [but] I noticed that we didn't change anything in that respect. There might [be] some differences between us; this is something that also happened in the past. I also found out that on the issue of the ICC, the secretary of state, rightly so, was worried [about] the decision, which is a political decision, which is shameful, [even] against the Oslo Accords. Right away we spoke before about the idea of a Palestinian state, but we saw here, that even before a Palestinian state was created, the ICC said it is a Palestinian state, which is ridiculous. It also demonstrated to us what can be some of the consequences of the creation of such a state in terms of Israel's ability to defend itself. I think Israel is the most attacked country in the world. It is really shameful that of all countries, the ICC chooses to undermine Israel's rights to self-defense.

So all together I think the statements you mentioned were positive even though we might see some differences [among friends]. We have had great relations, but there have been some disputes on policy issues between Washington and Jerusalem over the years. The most important thing is that we must stand up for our national interests, and we will stand firm on national interests.

Satloff: Very good. We only have a few moments left. I have a long list of questions that I am trying to pull together. But I want to ask a couple of overarching questions. For better or for worse, the world knows a lot about your incumbent prime minister. He's been prime minister for a very long time. What do you want your allies and your adversaries to know about you, and about what makes you tick? What should your enemies, and your allies, know about you?

Saar: I am a proud Jew and a proud Zionist. I dedicate my life for the State of Israel. I served as an infantry soldier and I am still serving my country as a public servant. I am a husband and a father; I have four kids. I also have a grandson. The future is important for me, and I can only ensure the future by making the future of Israel more prosperous. I am also the son of an immigrant who came to Israel, who made *aliyah* to Israel, in 1965 from Argentina. He was a Zionist and he came along with all his family. As so many Jews had done in order to build this country, we had only a few hundreds of thousands of people when we established our state. But now we are more than 9 million people in this great state. And I believe we have the greatest people who can make a better future for us by changing direction. And this is what motivated me to form my new party. It is more important for me, and more meaningful for me, [than] anything I can do in the private sector.

Satloff: A lot of people were asking me to get on over your left shoulder, there is a picture of Jabotinsky and below Jabotinsky, a picture of Herzl. How should viewers be interpreting this ideological placement?

Saar: And I am a loyal student of Herzl and Jabotinsky. My father came to Israel on the ship that was called *Theodor Herzl*. He was the founder of a Zionist movement as a practical movement, and within eight years he created a revolution and really changed the history of our people. Jabotinsky is a Zionist leader whose views I believe in—not only in terms of the “iron wall” and other ideas connected to the struggle of Zionism, but also [regarding] liberal issues of equality between men and women for example. And this is what I believe.

Satloff: Very good. Gideon Saar, I want to thank you very much. I think this was a very revealing conversation to help our viewers understand

who you are and what your leadership might portend for the future of the State of Israel.

Saar: Thank you for this conversation Rob, and I hope we will meet again soon in Jerusalem, Washington, or both.

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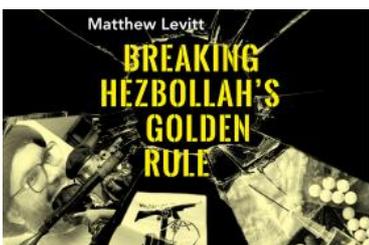
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