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Policy Forum

Countdown to Israel's Election: A Conversation with Yair Lapid

by [Yair Lapid](#), [David Makovsky](#), [Tamar Hermann](#)

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Brief Analysis

The centrist party leader discusses key domestic and international policy issues ahead of the upcoming Knesset elections, with follow-up analysis by political and polling experts.

On March 1, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Yair Lapid, David Makovsky, and Tamar Hermann. Below is a lightly edited transcript of Lapid's conversation with Institute executive director Robert Satloff, followed by a rapporteur's summary of Makovsky and Hermann's remarks.

Robert Satloff: Hello and welcome to The Washington Institute. I'm Rob Satloff, the director of the Institute, and I'm delighted to welcome you to this very special event focusing on Israel's fourth election in just two years. Today, we are going to spend our first half hour with a special guest, Yair Lapid, the founder and head of the Yesh Atid "There is

a Future” Party, which is currently running a very strong showing in the Knesset elections. I’m delighted to be able to have a conversation with Mr. Lapid.

After this thirty-minute conversation, I’m going to turn to a panel of experts. Tamar Hermann, from the Open University in Israel, is one of Israel’s leading pollsters. My colleague at The Washington Institute, David Makovsky, is an expert on Israel and Arab-Israel relations and the head of our Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations. But first, our conversation with Yair Lapid, former minister of finance. Thank you very much for joining us, Yair.

Yair Lapid: It’s a pleasure to be among friends.

Satloff: I’m going to ask you first about today’s news which came out of Israel, and then we’ll get into some broader election-related issues. The news from the Supreme Court: a major decision about recognizing the conversions of non-orthodox Jews, and therefore recognizing and extending Israeli citizenship to them. This has political consequences. Can you offer your view of the Supreme Court’s decision today?

Lapid: Well, this will split, once again, the Israeli political arena between extremists and pluralists. Some parties have already announced—of course the ultraorthodox parties, [Yamina leader Naftali] Bennett, probably Likud will follow—that they will change the law in order to bring back the wrong, exclusive statute on orthodox conversions. I, of course, congratulated the Supreme Court on the ruling. I think it’s ridiculous that Israel is the only Western country, the only democracy in the world, in which Jews do not have freedom of religion. It should be the other way around. So, my true belief is that this is the right ruling. Actually, it should be the law of the land, not a Supreme Court ruling. The Knesset should have announced that a long time ago. We alienated the majority of the American Jewry, of European Jews, of every Jew who doesn’t follow orthodox rulings. The exclusivity of the [Chief Rabbinate], the orthodox establishment, should be ended. I’m happy with this ruling.

This election is not only a discussion about [Prime Minister Binyamin] Netanyahu as it was in the former three campaigns, [it is] also about what kind of a country and what kind of government we’re going to have. Is it going to be pluralistic, tolerant, moving in the direction it seems that the entire world is now moving? Or is it always going to be another populist, extremist [country], with more than a hint of bigotry, the way we have now? The only good thing I can say about this is that we’re going to know within three-and-a-half weeks.

Satloff: Is there any fear that [the Supreme Court decision] will energize the ultraorthodox parties who will view this as a special cause to bring out the vote in even greater numbers, that this will have an electoral impact?

Lapid: Energize opposed to what, and empower opposed to what?...They’re going to be energized one way or another. Hopefully it’s going to energize the liberal voters because it defines, once again, that we’re in a struggle for the character of Israel as a democracy. The sacred balance between Judaism and democracy, between Israel as the nation-state of the Jews and the ability to be pluralistic, to listen, to have respect, has been terribly disturbed in the last couple of years with the Nation-State Law, with other issues, and especially with the total dominance of this ultraorthodox extremist ruling. So hopefully it’s going to energize our voters, as well...

Satloff: By my count, this is the sixth election in which you’re running going back to 2013. Four [were] of course in the last two years, but then [you also ran in] 2013 and 2015. That’s quite a lot of elections in just seven years. If you don’t mind me asking, using a phrase from the holiday that’s coming up in about a month, why is this election different from all others? Why do you expect this outcome to be different from all others?

Lapid: Actually, there is a difference from the last three. We ran as a united party in the last three elections with what used to be Blue and White. It was actually an American-like election in which you had two big parties running against each other with the natural advantage the incumbent usually has. Now it’s an election about the ability to create a coalition. Instead of two big parties we’re going to have one midsize-plus party, which is Likud, and another three midsize parties, of which Yesh Atid is probably going to be the biggest. Then there is New Hope of [Gideon]

Saar, and there's Bennett. Then there's [Avigdor] Liberman and others. The ability to form a coalition from a number of parties, which is something that is very strange to the American voter, is going to be a crucial thing in this election. So in this sense, these are very different elections.

I will add to this that the three elections we had were not about the coronavirus, COVID-19, were not about the way the state has handled the epidemic, were not about the kind of government that is needed to deal with this kind of crisis, which is a combination of the economy, health, and governance. Israel did well in terms of bringing in the vaccine, but did terribly bad on everything else. As of this morning we have 5,700 and some deaths from the epidemic. Cyprus next door has had 230, New Zealand has had 29, and Taiwan has had 7. It's very easy to track, which we did being the opposition, the kinds of faults, the kinds of accidents, and the kinds of wrong deeds the government was doing. [The pandemic] was not handled very well. I think the majority of Israelis understand nobody is dealing with the agony and the pain of the Israeli middle class trying to save themselves from the pandemic. These elections are different from the three that came before in terms of the sentiment.

On the other hand, people are not as energized or electrified as they were. I think the turnout of voters is going to be a huge factor in this election, but nobody knows how to read it thus far.

Satloff: In your answer to that question you referred to some of the other midsize parties and the challenge of coalition building. How does somebody where you are at the center of the political spectrum propose to put together a coalition that goes all the way from the right to the left? Bennett, Meretz, Gideon Saar, everybody's sitting under one umbrella? Is that possible?

Lapid: Well, it wouldn't be possible under regular circumstances, but these are not regular circumstances. First of all, only somebody from the center is able to put all this together in the same bed. This is because we have an ability to have a dialogue with everybody. The center, by definition, is pragmatic and talks about practical issues in practical terms. Therefore, we're going to tell the people in all those parties that you mentioned—listen, these are not regular times, this is not the regular government. What we're forming here is a crisis government or a national unity government for the next couple of years, or three years, to deal with the pandemic, try to heal from fifteen years of division and incitement, to let Netanyahu go to deal with his trial. I genuinely wish him the best but he needs to do that instead of trying to govern the country at the same time. It's going to be like a national healing kind of government, and only the center is capable [of this].

If somebody from the right was in charge—let's say Bennett—of constructing a government, he would have no way of dealing with as you say Meretz or Labor in its current form, which is leaning even more to the left than it was before. I think only the center has a fair chance of dealing with all those moving particles, trying to form something from that.

Having said that, it's going to be a nightmare. It's going to be hellish, I have no idea how we're going to do it. I need to see the results first. We'll be smarter on March 24, in the morning.

Satloff: ...You're on record as supporting the concept of separation between Israelis and Palestinians. What does that mean in practice? If you're prime minister, in April, May, June how would you begin to implement a process of separation?

Lapid: First of all, just to make things clear, separation means the two-state solution. It's just the act of separating toward the two-state solution. This is the only reasonable, the only real, doable thing. Here's why I differ from the Israeli right and from the Israeli left.

I differ from the Israeli right because I'm saying the two-state solution. The Palestinians should have self-recognition. I think it's safer for the Israelis. I don't want my children to be stuck with millions of unhappy Palestinians. Besides, I think it's not going to take long before the Palestinians come to us and say—especially if

they're going to have new leadership, and they're going to have new leadership as President [Mahmoud] Abbas is eighty-five years old and smokes like a chimney—this new leadership will come to us and say, “Okay, we realize, we understand you're not going to give us the country. So, we want to vote. One person one vote.” If we say yes, we are not a Jewish state anymore. If we say no, we are not a democracy anymore. Therefore, we need to move forward with the two-state solution.

Here is where I differ from the Israeli left. These two states will not mean the end of conflict. Unfortunately, I see no way in my lifetime, hopefully within my children's, there will be an end of conflict. These are going to be two countries, two independent countries, one with the strongest army in the Middle East, the other one totally demilitarized. Those two countries are going to have a conflict between them on two major issues. One is Jerusalem, because we will not agree to divide Jerusalem for the same reason the United States will not agree to divide Washington. And of course we will not agree to the right of return.

So these are going to be two states or two countries with an ongoing conflict between them, an unhappy conflict between them, but it's a better-defined conflict. There are many countries in the world that have conflicts within them.

We have to move forward with this—and the Abraham Accords have opened new opportunities—we have to move forward to a regional conference. To do this with the Saudis, we'll have to wait and see how the relations between the new administration and the Saudis progress. But basically, the Gulf countries, the Saudis, the Egyptians, the Jordanians should help us and the Palestinians form a regional conference and start negotiating. It's a long, long road, but we have to take the road less taken, and through that start the long road toward the two-state solution. This is what separation means to me.

Satloff: If the Palestinians choose not to go along with your vision, do you anticipate some sort of unilateral Israeli actions?

Lapid: The disengagement from Gaza, which I suppose is what you're referring to, is worse than a national memory, it's a national trauma. This is because we did everything the world had ever asked us to do. We left. We left them with 5,000 greenhouses for them to build an economy, and instead, you know what happened, they fired more than 50,000 rockets and missiles upon children. So, I don't think unilateral steps are the right thing to do. I think it should be negotiated.

If we form the next government, we will, to begin with, tell the Palestinians what it is that we are aiming at. We will discuss this with our new allies in the Gulf and our old allies in the region, and we'll start pushing forward. It's not going to work with the current regime in the Palestinian Authority, so we'll have to wait for the next one. We are patient people, we've waited 3,000 years to go back to our homeland.

Satloff: Now all of this, of course, occurs in a much broader and perhaps more menacing context. Here I want to also ask you about one of the other headlines of the day, namely what appears to have been an Iranian attack on an Israeli-owned ship sailing in the Gulf of Oman, and what appears to have been Israeli retaliation against Iranian targets in Syria. How do you evaluate how your current government is approaching the Iranian challenge, and what would you do differently?

Lapid: I have enough disagreements with Prime Minister Netanyahu on domestic and international issues. On that I agree, Israel must retaliate as strongly as possible. The Middle East unfortunately is an area that understands the language of power. They need to know we are not to be messed with and that there will be a hard reaction to any attack on Israelis anywhere. The Iranians have bitter memories from our ability to retaliate, but sometimes they need some reminding. They're going to have some. I'm not sure what happened in Syria the other day is enough for the awakening of the memory.

We understand that this is happening in sensitive times. The Biden administration wants to move forward with what we hope will be an improved [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA]. There's going to be an election in Iran in June. The moderates might lose power, but this is none of our business. What we want is for Israelis to be safe wherever they are, and for Israel not to be attacked without a strong Israeli response.

Satloff: It was only a couple of weeks ago that the chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces, Lt. Gen. [Aviv] Kochavi, gave a rather strong speech in which he said that there was no good diplomatic option, that there was no good JCPOA that could be had. He urged against reengaging with Iran diplomatically. This, of course, is different from the U.S. administration's approach. Where do you come down on this?

Lapid: I said publicly that I think, up to a point, General Kochavi was right, but it's not his place wearing uniform to criticize your administration or American policies to begin with. This is what the politicians and the diplomats should do, not the military people. Maybe it was the right speech, but it was the wrong person to deliver it.

Now, here's what I have to say about the JCPOA, or what should happen now. We have three options. I'm going from the best to the worst.

The best option is a good agreement. A good agreement means a lot of things that didn't happen or were not there in the original JCPOA. It means an agreement that includes the ballistic missile program, much better supervision, and a much better sunset clause. Of course, it should discuss the fact that the Iranians are the largest spreader of terror all around the Middle East. It should be more concrete, it should have more power of observation over the Iranian nuclear program, which the JCPOA just didn't have enough of. The best thing for me is an agreement. I am all for a good agreement. I think President [Emmanuel] Macron of France was in his right mind saying "let's just improve what we have instead of discussing a new deal altogether."

The second best option—or the second worst, depending on where you are coming from—is a continuation of the sanctions, because the sanctions, when enforced the right way, have achieved most of what we needed. Let me remind you that the Iranians moved to the JCPOA only because the Obama administration tightened the sanctions like never before. So if you don't have the right agreement, you should go on with the sanctions and until the Iranians choke. The Iranians are the best negotiators on earth, and only discussing it with them will not be enough. They need to feel the Teddy Roosevelt stick, not only the Teddy Roosevelt soft language.

The third, and worst, option of them all is the wrong agreement, the wrong JCPOA, which is just a tool for the Iranians to go on with their policy of "let's let the Westerners hear what they want to hear while doing what we want to do." This is just the wrong approach toward the idea of a nuclear Iran. A nuclear Iran is the end of the Middle East as we know it for sure, but it's also a new threat to the entire globe that we don't want, and I'm underestimating now.

Satloff: I want to ask you about how you view what appears to be at least an attempt at shifting the emphasis of American policy, in the sense that President Biden took weeks to speak to any Middle Eastern leader, eventually spoke to your prime minister, spoke to the king of Saudi Arabia just before issuing this report on Friday. He's spoken to leaders all around the world, but clearly the Middle East doesn't have the same resonance, the same priority in American foreign policy that it did in previous administrations. How is this viewed from where you sit? Is this wise, correct, a mistake? If you had five minutes with Joe Biden, what would you say to him?

Lapid: I would tell him that he should follow his own policy toward Israel and the Middle East. He has been one of Israel's best friends on the Hill, in the Senate, and he knows his way around. Every American knows and remembers, because it's a national scar, that if you ignore the Middle East, the Middle East will come to you. You don't want this to happen. I think it was President Biden himself who said that Israel is the cheapest [aircraft] carrier the United States has on the ocean in terms of dealing with issues that if Israel was not here dealing with, probably would end up hitting American soil.

I understand completely because this is the new world we live in, a new American president says, “I have to deal with climate change, because we have to deal with climate change. I have to deal with the trade war we have with China because it’s a crucial issue for the American economy and the American future.” I totally understand this. Of course, this president comes to office in the time of a terrible pandemic that hit the United States pretty hard and maybe wasn’t handled as it should have [been]. I’m sure the Americans in this conversation listened to me saying we have 5,700 people who died from COVID-19 in Israel and said “we wish,” even in relative terms. I think it’s understandable that the priorities of this administration are different.

Hopefully I’m going to have five minutes with this president; I had a long conversation with him when he was vice president. He is as smart as they come, he knows Israeli politics—he and Lindsey Graham are the two people who know [Israeli] politics from within the best. If I had five minutes, I would tell him it is never a good idea not to be cautious or not to be proactive about what is happening in the Middle East, looking at the powers and looking at the powers to be. We cannot have a world in which the superpower ignores its duties as a superpower. We are living in this Pax Americana time. It’s a good thing, because it’s brought to the table values I deeply believe in, made democracy the heart of international discourse. These are all great things that America has brought to the international table.

But it comes with duties as well. It’s not my place to tell Americans what their duties are, but I think ever since the Wilson Doctrine, the United States has had a deep understanding of its role as the leader of the civilized world. This is a civilized president with a civilized administration. I hope they’re going to play their part. This is a speech I wasn’t prepared to give to the new president.

Satloff: Every candidate knows that toward the end of an election campaign, you have to make a closing argument to get your voters to the polls and make sure that they don’t vote for some other party that might be close to yours, but isn’t yours. Why you? Why should people in the center, the center-left, the center-right vote for Yesh Atid?

Lapid: Sanity. It’s a one-second answer, not even one minute. The world is not divided anymore between right and left, socialists and capitalists. It’s [divided] between sane people and people who are just saying crazy stuff as a way of ruling. What we need is the return of sanity.

Yesh Atid is a very sane, middle of the road, pragmatic, practical kind of party, and this is the kind of trustworthy governance the country needs, the world needs. This is what we’re going to bring to the table. It’s been a crazy couple of years: a pandemic, a prime minister with three criminal indictments, this clash between state and religion. Everything is just crazy. It’s time to go back to sanity, the way sanity is, and this is what we bring to the table. My answer is to the very few, probably, Israeli voters on this screen: if you want sanity back in your life, you have to vote for Yesh Atid.

Satloff: Yair Lapid, the founder and head of Yesh Atid Party. Thank you so much

Lapid: Thank you. Enjoy the rest of your afternoon. Thank you.

Rapporteur's Summary of Other Speakers

David Makovsky

At present, neither the right nor the center has a clear path to power in Israel’s March 23 election. In the previous three elections, Netanyahu’s coalition—consisting of Likud, the ultraorthodox parties, and Yamina—repeatedly fell short of the sixty-one seats required for a Knesset majority. Likud’s projected tally has only dropped since then, despite the government achieving normalization with four Arab states and leading the world in the coronavirus

vaccination effort. Even if potential kingmaker Naftali Bennett joins Netanyahu, the resultant coalition would fall short at fifty-eight seats.

Similarly, the center-left has been unable to project a cohesive coalition due to internal divisions. This is partly because figures such as Bennett, Avigdor Liberman, and Gideon Saar refuse to sit with the Arab Joint List, citing its support for Palestinian violence. Meanwhile, Saar and others have indicated they will not serve under Netanyahu. The scene is further complicated by the potential loss of coalition seats if certain smaller parties fail to meet the electoral threshold for entering parliament.

All these cross-pressures mean that one of two scenarios is most likely: either a major actor (e.g., Bennett or Saar) reneges on his promise about not sitting with certain leaders, or the country slides toward an eventual fifth round of elections. Even if a government forms, stability is unlikely given the heterogeneity of any potential coalition. Can anti-Netanyahu animus hold an ideologically disparate coalition together? Alternatively, do Saar and Bennett care more about replacing the current government or establishing their leadership of the right? And would those who choose to sit with Netanyahu help insulate him from prosecution in his current corruption trial? More generally, the country needs electoral reform, but this issue is missing from the public discussion.

Regarding U.S. policy, Israel will not have a functioning government until May at best, so major decisions could be delayed. And if right-of-center politicians dominate parliament as projected (as many as 80 seats in recent polls), this could create [implications for U.S. foreign policy](#). Since President Biden's victory, Netanyahu has been forced to navigate more carefully, recognizing that the United States is Israel's patron and that he cannot simply marginalize Biden in the eyes of the Israeli public given the president's long record of support for their country.

The current campaign has also precipitated changes in participation among Arab Israelis. Many younger Arabs want to be more integrated in Israeli society and are delinking Palestine from their politics. Meanwhile, Netanyahu's [recent actions toward this community](#) have had the net effect of increasing Arab Israeli representation on several party lists.

Despite all of these domestic complications and divisions, Israelis have shown they can unite behind good ideas when presented with carefully framed policy tradeoffs—whether by leaders at home or in Washington. Their political categories are less monolithic than they might appear, especially regarding foreign policy.

Tamar Hermann

The distribution of Israeli voters among the left, center, and right has fundamentally changed. In the early 1990s, the left and right had roughly proportional representation. In a 2020 poll, however, 60% of Jewish Israeli respondents self-identified as right or hardline right, 24% identified as centrist, and a mere 13% identified as left.

Yet “right” should not be equated with support for Netanyahu. Approximately 55% of Israelis polled do not want him to be the next prime minister, over 60% believe that prime ministers should be limited to two terms, and about 66% believe that individuals in office should not be involved in active court cases. These trends indicate sizable anti-Netanyahu sentiment on the right.

On a more fundamental level, the Israeli right and left have substantially different views on lifestyle, LGBTQ rights, women's rights, the role of Jewishness, and the democratic nature of the state. Disagreements over these issues—particularly the latter two—form the heart of current Israeli politics. Right-left divisions are not as driven by foreign policy or the Palestinian issue.

Israelis who identify the economy as their primary voting criterion for this election tend to hail from the middle and upper-middle class. This trend came about even though these classes have been relatively insulated from the economic implications of COVID-19. Voters from Likud and the Shas Party have been more affected by the economic downturn, yet their party allegiance is very strong—a striking 95% of ultraorthodox respondents and 70% of Likud

respondents say they will vote for the same party they supported in the previous election.

Undecided voters are seemingly concentrated at the center—around 35% of those who identify as centrist are undecided. Furthermore, many centrists have said they do not plan on voting at all given their traumatic experience with Blue and White's disintegration and their unwillingness to associate with Yesh Atid again. Others are hesitant to vote for Saar out of concern that this would ultimately wind up supporting the right and Netanyahu.

The situation is dismal on the left as well, with uncertainty about Meretz and Labor being able to cross the electoral threshold. Ultimately, a stable center-left coalition is unlikely. Those on the right hold the edge due to their higher birthrates, the history of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, and the lack of an innovative, charismatic leader on the left.

Yet a fifth round of elections is not the solution. The underlying question is how to change the system to create the possibility for a conclusive winner. It is unclear if political leaders would be receptive to this change, though.

As for the Joint List, despite its success in previous elections, it is losing public trust and projected seats because of its failure to provide concrete benefits to voters. Arab Israeli voters realize that there will be no near-term breakthrough on the Palestinian issue, so they are instead focusing on civil status issues, budgetary expansion, and construction permits. They are also eager for a strong leader. These factors, combined with shared views on certain lifestyle issues, help explain why some Arab Israeli voters are supporting the right.

Various wildcard factors could still emerge before the election, such as a COVID-19 spike limiting non-orthodox voter turnout or a prominent figure dropping out of the race. Whatever happens, Netanyahu will tread lightly with the United States if he is reelected, likely demonstrating flexibility on certain topics.

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