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Two Kingmakers Stand at the Center of Israel's Coalition Drama

by [David Makovsky](#)

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Brief Analysis

Despite winning relatively few seats, Naftali Bennett and Mansour Abbas may have much to say about who forms the next government, and a fragile coalition seems inevitable regardless of which side they choose.

On April 7, Israeli president Reuven Rivlin will decide which candidate receives the mandate to form the next government following the inconclusive March 23 parliamentary election. At the center of the drama are two potential kingmakers at opposite sides of the political spectrum: Naftali Bennett, head of the right-wing party Yamina, and Arab Israeli politician Mansour Abbas, head of the breakaway United Arab List (UAL). This could be the first time in Israel's history that an Arab party holds the balance of power in the 120-seat Knesset, as each side needs help to reach a bare majority of 61 seats. Although Bennett and Abbas could end Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's long grip on power by enabling a heterodox coalition, the politically savvy incumbent cannot be counted out given his record of outmaneuvering rivals.

At the moment, pro-Netanyahu forces can muster 52 seats while anti-Netanyahu forces have 57—a situation that may spur Bennett (7 seats) to ally with centrist politician Yair Lapid (17 seats) and move to the front of the anti-Netanyahu "Change Bloc." Earlier today, the prime minister's most far-right allies reaffirmed that they would not join a coalition linked to the UAL, further complicating his prospects.

Netanyahu Underperforms

Despite entering this campaign with many strengths, Netanyahu lost close to 300,000 votes compared to the previous election, and his Likud Party dropped from 36 seats a year ago to 30 at present. Some of these losses occurred in traditional Likud bastions; the party also dropped three seats to former Likud member Gideon Saar and two more to Bennett by narrow margins. In addition, Netanyahu was forced to steer some votes toward the hard-right faction led by Bezalel Smotrich (6 seats) out of fear that it might not pass the electoral threshold.

Netanyahu may regret how he handled two proteges-turned-rivals, since Bennett's 7 seats and Saar's 6 would be enough to keep him in power. Poor personal relationships could spell the difference in determining if his election gamble was worth it.

In any case, his actions since the results became clear suggest he would not mind going to a fifth round of elections. For example, in the days leading up to the vote, he publicly disavowed relying on the UAL as either a coalition partner or safety net against parliamentary no-confidence votes, but his tone has now changed. His advisors have been quietly telling reporters that he would like to have a relationship with the UAL, and he forbade Likud members from doing any further interviews when some publicly squabbled over whether the Arab party should be included. For now, he still holds cards in any coalition negotiation, and if another election proves inevitable, he will remain the prime minister in a caretaker capacity for at least several more months. He has also rejected the argument that Benny Gantz should remain the interim justice minister during any caretaker period—a crucial issue as Netanyahu's corruption trial enters its most substantive phase starting April 5.

Can Bennett and Lapid Lead the Change Bloc?

Under pressure from Netanyahu's campaign, Bennett initially pledged not to serve in a coalition with Lapid's Yesh Atid faction for ideological reasons. As soon as the election concluded, however, Bennett delivered a speech that emphasized phrases such as “ending the chaos,” “no fifth elections,” and “national healing,” leading many to believe he would not sit with Netanyahu. Indeed, he seems willing to join the Change Bloc—so long as he is named prime minister.

This may look awkward given how few seats he won. Yet Lapid has shown signs of agreeing with him so long as they rotate the premiership at the midpoint of the next government, with Bennett going first. Rivlin announced this week that his decision will be guided by whoever has the best chance to form a government, implying that he may not necessarily choose the party leader with the most seats. Yet the level of trust between the Lapid and Bennett camps remains low. Those close to Lapid insist that he be given the formal mandate, partly because they want him to play the conductor in the subsequent coalition negotiations, but also because they fear Bennett might engage in flirtations with Netanyahu that take the political dynamic in the opposite direction.

In his only public remarks since the election, Netanyahu called on Bennett and Saar to “come home” to the right. Saar immediately spurned this solicitation, but Netanyahu has continued to woo Bennett by reportedly offering Yamina one-sixth of all seats in Likud's party institutions—a degree of integration that Bennett has long sought. The prime minister failed to honor his promised rotation with Gantz in the current government, so Bennett may have little inclination to believe such promises. At the same time, however, Bennett still hopes to become leader of the right someday—a difficult task if he angers much of the right by deposing Netanyahu.

Mansour Abbas Takes the Stage

In a primetime speech delivered in Hebrew on April 1, Mansour Abbas made a pragmatic appeal while essentially introducing himself to the wider Israeli public. Seeking to dispel the conventional domestic perception of Islamist parties, he emphasized the importance of an Israeli “common life” and stated that he “despised” all forms of violence. “That which unites us all is greater than what divides us,” he declared, arguing that failure to cooperate will

create an “impossible future” for the next generation. He also noted his intent to secure more basic services for Arab Israelis, a proposal that has broad support across the country.

Abbas was careful not to tip his hand regarding coalition partners, but some of his advisors have told reporters that supporting a right-wing government could have lasting implications for mainstream Arab Israeli parties in broader national politics. Whichever side he chooses, he has indicated he would prefer not to be a formal member of a coalition, instead supporting it from the outside so it can withstand parliamentary no-confidence votes.

This potential arrangement brings to mind past governments headed by Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres, and Ehud Barak during the 1990s, when disagreements over negotiations with the Palestinians broke the governing majorities and resulted in coalitions that ruled as “minority governments”. Although these shrunken coalitions held fewer than 61 seats, they were able to stay in power thanks to parliamentary safety nets extended by Arab parties that likewise eschewed formal coalition membership.

Implications for U.S. Policy

No matter who forms the next government, U.S. officials should understand that the resultant coalition will likely be quite fragile and politically heterogeneous, especially regarding policy toward the Palestinians. For decisions on West Bank settlement activity and other highly charged issues, the “Change Bloc” would need to manage disputes between right-wing parties (led by Bennett, Saar, and Avigdor Liberman) and left-wing members (Labor and Meretz). Potential prime minister Bennett has long been pro-settler and pro-annexation, while other members sharply oppose such views.

If Netanyahu prevails, he would need to convince the small but vocal far-right faction led by Smotrich—which includes a neo-Kahanist—to accept outside parliamentary support from the UAL. Smotrich has refused to sit with Abbas, and he excoriated the Arab leader’s April 1 speech as a “cute teddy bear” aimed at covering up the UAL’s Islamist views.

Although these and other factors make it even more unlikely that the Biden administration will pursue a major Palestinian initiative, other foreign policy issues are more politically manageable. Further normalization with Arab states is a consensus issue in Israel, as is preventing Iran from [reaching nuclear weapons threshold status](#). Netanyahu is often personally associated with the “maximum pressure” approach, but all other Israeli candidates would likewise urge Washington to maintain strong economic leverage against Tehran in any nuclear negotiations. For its part, the Biden administration was careful to stay out of the Israeli election campaign, yet it would undoubtedly feel more comfortable with a government that does not embrace neo-Kahanists or denigrate respected judicial institutions.

David Makovsky is the Ziegler Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute, creator of the podcast [Decision Points](#), and author of the presidential transition paper “[Building Bridges for Peace: U.S. Policy Toward Arab States, Palestinians, and Israel](#).” ❖



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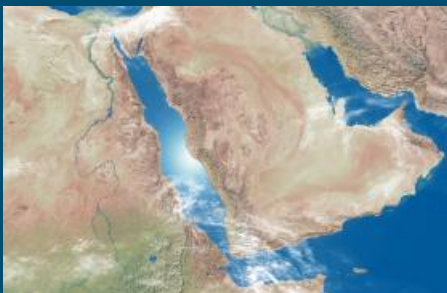


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