

Political Tempest in Israel: Can Bennett Right the Ship?

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

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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

His coalition is just one lost seat from being legislatively hobbled or even ousted altogether, leaving him and his allies in Washington with little time for essential damage control.

Naftali Bennett's government may have just faced its most difficult week yet. Ramadan has seen a [string of terrorist attacks \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/terror-and-turbulence-israel-and-west-bank\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/terror-and-turbulence-israel-and-west-bank) in Tel Aviv and other locales, with several civilians killed. Israeli forces responded by entering the Jenin refugee camp and surrounding areas in search of assailants. Meanwhile, coalition whip Idit Silman announced that her orthodox religious convictions have led her to consider leaving Bennett's diverse government, which could be brought down by such individual moves because it holds a razor-thin majority of 61 seats in the 120-member Knesset. If she follows through on this threat when parliament reconvenes early next month, some have speculated it may give Likud Party opposition leader Binyamin Netanyahu a path to resume his long rule as premier. What are Bennett's (and Washington's) options for avoiding this scenario?

Netanyahu's Limited Prospects

Netanyahu exalted Silman's decision and predicted his imminent return to power, asserting that her departure puts him one parliamentarian away from controlling sixty-one seats and thereby calling for a no-confidence vote against Bennett's government. In reality, however, Netanyahu and his largely ultraorthodox allies hold only fifty-two seats. His claim of being one seat away presumes that the six-member Arab-led Joint List would join his theoretical coalition, along with Silman and another disaffected member of Bennett's Yamina Party, Amichai Chikli. This is a farfetched assumption given the Joint List's ideological profile (i.e., too far left even for Bennett's mixed coalition) and its public response so far. On April 9, Joint List leader Ayman Odeh stated, "If anyone thinks that we're going to be Netanyahu's partners in a constructive no-confidence motion—no way."

Odeh's remark is particularly significant because of the legal concept he referenced: "constructive no-confidence,"

which the Knesset adopted in 2001 to prevent parliamentarians from attempting to bring down governments with no-confidence votes unless they have a viable replacement government on hand. More specifically, any party that votes to bring down the current government automatically commits to being part of a new government led by the party that sponsors the no-confidence resolution. Like Odeh, [Defense Minister Benny Gantz](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/defense-minister-benny-gantz-discusses-israels-strategic-challenges) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/defense-minister-benny-gantz-discusses-israels-strategic-challenges>) has disavowed the prospect of his party joining a Likud government, so Netanyahu has no path to lead a no-confidence vote. His best hope is to throw Israel into yet another election cycle.

Can Bennett Right the Ship?

Silman stated that her decision was spurred by the health minister's recent ruling that non-kosher food could be used in hospitals during Passover. Critics scoffed at this claim as a false pretense, however, insisting that her real impetus was a climate of right-wing intimidation in her religious community of Rehovot, many of whose residents believe Bennett's government is overly solicitous toward the Arab Israeli community and therefore a threat to the state's Jewish character.

Ironically, the prime minister's own party is the coalition's most wobbly faction. Yet this is not entirely surprising given that the seven-member Yamina list was chosen before Bennett decided to take the leap and head a hybrid government. Previously, it was a reliably right-wing faction.

In Bennett's favor, the Knesset does not convene again until May 9, which could give him enough time to either coax Silman back to the fold or persuade her to resign in favor of the next person on the Yamina list who is deemed loyal to Bennett. Yet stopping the bleeding will presumably require him to go far beyond the one meeting he has held so far with his faction. Press commentary has been filled with accusations that Bennett is spending more time on the phone with Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelensky than improving relations with Yamina members, several of whom are unconvinced that this government is providing results for its base. Interestingly, the same people who call on Bennett to use honey also believe he should use vinegar—that is, by invoking a law against “renegade” parliamentarians who, once designated by the Knesset House Committee, cannot join a rival list in the next election. Bennett's survival will depend on his ability to convince other members (particularly on the right) that the coalition is not a sinking ship. The recent spate of terrorist attacks [does not help him in this regard](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/managing-new-israeli-palestinian-tensions-during-ramadan) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/managing-new-israeli-palestinian-tensions-during-ramadan>).

If the Silman situation is not adequately dealt with in the coming weeks, the prime minister may be facing two big problems. First, certain parliamentarians—including three more of Bennett's party members who are considered wobbly—may be emboldened by the idea that they can now extort the government on certain issues. Yamina member Nir Orbach has already announced that he wants to roll back measures designed to get more ultraorthodox Jews into the workforce. He also wants to link illegal West Bank outposts to the Israeli electricity grid and boost overall settlement activity without specifying location. How the government responds to Orbach will signal whether a few parliamentarians can dictate the tempo for Bennett.

Second, Silman's departure alone could stymie the government's parliamentary agenda by leaving it with just sixty seats and removing its slim majority. The potential inability to pass legislation would be terrible news for a coalition that wants to show progress on numerous popular initiatives, including a major public transportation push (e.g., a Tel Aviv area subway), kosher food certification reforms that would lower prices, and a streamlined process to dispel the legal limbo enveloping hundreds of thousands of Eastern Europeans who have sought to convert to Judaism and obtain citizenship. In that scenario, Bennett may try to reach understandings with the Joint List outside the coalition in order to pass certain legislation, much like Yitzhak Rabin did when he headed a minority government in the mid-1990s.

Under Israeli law, the current government will fall if it does not pass its next budget by March 2023. Nobody in Bennett's coalition has strong enough polling numbers to favor early elections—most of them have been counting on accumulating achievements over a full four-year term.

If the above dynamics are not handled deftly, the government could be ousted even sooner than that. Only sixty-one votes are required to disperse the Knesset and schedule new elections—a fact that once again puts the spotlight on the Joint List and its crucial six seats. In theory, the same logic that led Odeh to say he will not help Netanyahu return to power via the no-confidence mechanism should also keep him from voting to disperse the Knesset, since the resultant elections could easily bring Netanyahu back via a different path. Yet Odeh's main political rival is Mansour Abbas of the United Arab List, who has catapulted to become **a linchpin of Bennett's coalition** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/arab-leader-israel-conversation-mansour-abbas>). The longer the government survives, the more Abbas will be able to show Arab Israelis that his conciliatory approach—and not Odeh's fiery rhetoric—brings them tangible results.

Implications for U.S. Policy

The Biden administration does not want to see the Bennett government hobbled, let alone ousted. First, a weakened government would presumably be pressed to build more settlement units in the West Bank, which is incompatible with the administration's desire to move the Israeli-Palestinian conflict toward an eventual two-state solution.

Second, if the Iran nuclear deal goes forward—a question whose answer seems to change by the day—a weakened Bennett may feel obligated to mobilize against the agreement as Netanyahu did in 2015, if only to strengthen his hand domestically ahead of early elections. His stance so far has been to improve the deal's terms, not reject it outright.

Third, U.S. officials have been more enthusiastic about supporting Bennett's diverse government and its cross-partisan emphasis on upholding the independence of Israel's law enforcement and judiciary institutions. A hard-right government that threatens to erode these institutions as Netanyahu did would be more difficult for Washington to support full-throatedly.

During Netanyahu's last term, more Israelis backed him when it became clear he had full support from the Trump administration. President Biden is personally popular in Israel, but some citizens question his administration on various issues, particularly its apparent eagerness to make key compromises in order to render a nuclear deal more palatable to Iran. Accordingly, the Biden administration may decide that Israel's political crisis represents an opportunity to support Bennett's government even more meaningfully, perhaps by planning a presidential visit or prioritizing efforts to **expand the Abraham Accords** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-regional-role-israel-washington-shows-signs-stepping-back>) to other Arab states.

David Makovsky is the Ziegler Distinguished Fellow in The Washington Institute's Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations and creator of the podcast [Decision Points](https://shows.acast.com/decision-points/) (<https://shows.acast.com/decision-points/>). ❖

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