

# A Narrow Government with Ben Gvir and Smotrich Threatens US-Israel Ties

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**Appointing senior ministers who incite against Arabs would undermine the shared values that buttress the bilateral relationship while giving fuel to Israel's critics in Washington.**

**F**ollowing Israel's fifth election in less than four years, Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's longest-serving prime minister, is poised to return to that office again. Even if divided, the country has clearly moved to the right. The "government of change," which lasted a year included the left, center, right, and an Arab party for the first time, but it was undone not by its ideological diversity but by violence. Polls showed that in March 2022 a majority of Israeli Jews believed it was a good thing that an Arab party was in the government. That view changed dramatically with Palestinian acts of terror against Israelis during Ramadan—and the right wing's claim that the government was limited in its response because it depended on an Arab party.

In reality, the Bennett-led government was not soft in its response, but the image stuck and contributed to the growth of the extreme right-wing party led by Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben Gvir. No one gained more from the violence and increasing mistrust of Israeli Arabs than the Religious Zionist Party, becoming the third-largest party in Israel.

Yes, Netanyahu is in a position to form a government, and his speech on election night was far more conciliatory

than his campaign posture. But he does not face a simple choice. His clearest path to government formation depends on forging a narrow right-wing coalition. Such a government would not only depend on making Ben Gvir and Smotrich senior ministers but permit them to hold the balance of power in the government.

Netanyahu may not be adventurist, but they are. And that will have consequences in Israel with the Israeli Arabs and the legal system; with the Palestinians and the likely increase in violence; and with Israel's Arab peace partners. (Abdullah bin Zayed—the foreign minister of the UAE—warned Netanyahu during a trip to Israel before the election that the inclusion of Smotrich and Ben Gvir would affect the relationship with the Emirates.)

The reverberations will be felt here in America as well. Senator Robert Menendez, a centrist Democrat with a strong track record of support for Israel, bluntly warned of the consequences for the US-Israeli relationship if Smotrich and Ben Gvir were to become senior members of the government. That should set off alarm bells in Israel. Menendez was reflecting something fundamental about the US-Israeli relationship; it is rooted in shared values.

Yes, shared interests are important, but Americans identified with Israel because of shared values. It was those values that attracted Harry Truman to support the creation of Israel; Jack Kennedy to be the first to speak of a “special relationship”; Ronald Reagan to identify with the Jewish state. Similarly, shared values produced strong support for Israel among those in Congress, Republican and Democrat, who have come from districts or states that have negligible Jewish presence. Our shared values created the lens through which the interests came to be seen. It made support for Israel bipartisan.

Lose the sense of shared values and something basic will be lost. Moreover, lose the shared values and Israel's fiercest critics in the US will be given an enormous boost. Already some in the progressive movement argue that Israel does not share our values—it is the source of their criticism of Israel. They want to distance the US from Israel, change the character of the relationship, vote against military assistance, and even deny Israel the right to defend itself when Hamas or Hezbollah fire rockets against it.

There could be no greater gifts for these progressives than having ministers in the next government that are anti-Arab, incite against them, and oppose an independent judiciary and the separation of powers. Should Prime Minister Netanyahu opt to form a narrow right government, Itamar Ben Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich will become its face. Their open hostility toward Israeli Arabs and their intended legal “reforms” will weaken Israel's image as a democracy.

Those who have no love for Israel will seize on this. They will use it to expand their appeal in the Congress and the country. They will exploit it to try to undo aspects of the relationship, and certainly to challenge Israeli military requests. And they will see it as an opportunity to join with their European counterparts who seek to delegitimize Israel.

The reality is that no one should take the character of the US-Israeli relationship for granted. Yes, there are inherent enduring strengths because, notwithstanding its critics, five elections remind everyone that Israel is a democracy in which the Israeli public has the final say. And yes Israel is also the “Start-Up Nation”

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/asset-test>) and offers much to its region and the world on water (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/worldwide-water-crises-israeli-innovations-can-help>), food (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/israeli-startups-are-leading-efforts-combat-food-insecurity>), health, and cyber security. (Moreover, with Russian and Iranian drones (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iranian-drones-russia-capabilities-and-limitations>) signaling new dangers and threats to the world, Israeli developments that can be game-changers, like laser-based defenses, are likely to add further to the importance of Israel as a partner.)

Still, there is a campaign against Israel and it is important not to strengthen the hand of those determined to weaken the relationship. Government formation in Israel is an Israeli decision. In normal circumstances, we, as Americans,

would not be offering our counsel on it. But these are not normal circumstances, and, in good conscience, we cannot remain silent knowing the enormous impact that the words and actions of Itamar Ben Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich as senior ministers would have on the US-Israeli relationship. That relationship is too precious and important to both countries and the Middle East as a whole—given Iranian threats—for it to be harmed. Even though it would mean resisting the rising tide of the far right, Netanyahu would be wise to form not a narrow-based government but a broad-based one that embodies and does not undermine Israel's democratic values.

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