

## Dueling Narratives in Israel's Election Campaign

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Brief Analysis

### A new political merger has distilled the campaign into a two-faction race, and each side is already crafting its message accordingly.

**O**n February 21, Israel's two main centrist parties—Benny Gantz's "Resilience" faction and Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid Party—announced a merger, intensifying the sense that the country's famously fractious multiparty elections will be a two-horse race this time around, with other parties relegated to the edges. Called "Blue and White" in patriotic reference to Israel's flag, the new joint party brings together three former military chiefs of staff for the first time in Israel's history: Gantz, Moshe Yaalon, and Gabi Ashkenazi. Moreover, Gantz has been polling neck-and-neck with Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu on the question of who is most suitable to lead the country, a challenge the premier has not faced in his last three wins.

These developments may upend Netanyahu's original plan, which appeared to center on giving Gantz a top portfolio in his cabinet after his Likud Party prevails in the April 9 elections. Now that the center sees itself as a bona fide challenger to Likud, Lapid and Yaalon will likely press Gantz to announce that he will not join Netanyahu's government if the premier wins again. Adding to the tumult, Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit may recommend corruption indictments against Netanyahu as soon as next week.

### BLUE AND WHITE NARRATIVE: NETANYAHU IS A DIVIDER

**G**antz and his new allies will likely try to make the election a referendum on Netanyahu's leadership. Their main critique is that he is pitting Israelis against each other to extract maximal electoral advantage, prioritizing his base and personal political survival above the country's unity. They seem to hope public enthusiasm about their merger will create a sense of momentum that will only grow if Mandelblit announces he is starting the indictment process for any of [the various corruption accusations against Netanyahu](#)

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/israels-battle-of-the-benjamins-netanyahu-vs->

gantz).

Since this narrative would largely absolve Blue and White from focusing its platform on Palestinian peace issues, the party may be hoping to attract at least some right-leaning candidates to its suggested Knesset list (in Israel's parliamentary system, votes are cast for parties, not individuals). This potential combination of a hybrid candidate list, party leaders with major security credentials, and a thematic focus on unity could woo a key segment of Israeli voters: the "soft right." According to the Israel Democracy Institute, 63% of the country's Jewish majority now self-identify as being somewhere on the right side of the political spectrum, so there are many votes to be found there.

## LIKUD NARRATIVE: CHANGE IS TOO RISKY

**N**etanyahu no doubt understands the appeal of this emerging Blue and White strategy. His past success lay in his uncanny ability to frame every election as a mandate on threats to Israel's national security, with himself cast as the country's top guardian. Yet Blue and White's combination of three former military chiefs will likely neutralize that tactic, which could help the new party's "divider" narrative come to the fore instead. Moreover, a preliminary indictment announcement would presumably lead to a chorus of pundits questioning whether Likud's previously peerless political asset has suddenly become a liability.

As of now, polls conducted immediately after Blue and White's merger show Likud running behind in the race for the first time (36 seats to 30 in the 120-seat Knesset, according to *Yediot Aharonot*). Yet Netanyahu has come from behind before and knows that this dynamic could actually work to his advantage. In general, right-leaning Israeli voters tend to be confident that he will wind up the overall winner in elections, convincing many that they have the luxury of using their votes to get other parties past the parliamentary threshold. When Netanyahu is running behind, however, these people are susceptible to his argument that the stakes of losing are too high, and that they must vote for Likud to ensure it prevails.

Indeed, if the 2015 election is any precedent, Netanyahu goes harder to the right when he is running from behind, in the hope of wooing right-wing voters from other parties. He used brass-knuckle tactics in that campaign, warning Jews that they had to vote because Israeli Arabs were coming out in droves. He did the same this week right after the Blue and White announcement, warning that Israeli Arab parties could tilt the elections. Meanwhile, he took the extraordinary step of organizing a right-wing merger outside Likud that includes a disciple of Meir Kahane, an extremist hate-monger who was banned from the Knesset in 1981. He also promised to give the education portfolio in the next government to a member of the same party.

In short, Netanyahu's campaign style is not to ask for a public referendum on a particular policy approach, but rather to raise sufficient skepticism about his rivals, and about Palestinian intentions toward Israel. He will likely sharpen such attacks going forward, so the next two months will test whether such rhetoric now rings hollow.

On the Palestinian front, Netanyahu has already dismantled the question of whether peace negotiations are prudent. He and his advisors have convinced much of the Israeli public that Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas is not a sincere partner, and depicted anyone who presses for peace in the present environment as naive. This narrative has been so potent that neither Gantz nor Lapid felt safe bringing peace champion Tzipi Livni onto their list, spurring her to announce recently that she is quitting politics.

Netanyahu's advisors have also begun to warn voters that if Blue and White wins but no grand peace proposal emerges in the coming months, Gantz and his allies will be tempted to unilaterally limit settlement activity outside the security barrier. An estimated 85 percent of Israeli settlers

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/westbankinteractivemap/>) live inside the barrier, and approximately 99 percent of West Bank Palestinians live outside it, leading many Israeli and foreign observers to call for such limits in the past. Yet the Likud argues that this would be tantamount to giving the Palestinians something for free.

Given the complexity of the issue and the potential political fallout, Gantz and Lapid have skirted any West Bank proposals resembling the 2005 Gaza disengagement, despite the key security distinctions between the two territories (e.g., the continued Israeli military deployment in the West Bank). In theory, they could maintain that safe approach in order to attract the soft right, staying silent about their desired proposals for improving the Palestinian situation via bilateral and unilateral steps. Yet this might open another line of attack for Likud: that Blue and White is being too vague or hiding its true agenda.

Ironically, Netanyahu may trumpet his record on Israeli engagement with Arab states even as he forecloses the possibility of a Palestinian deal. His recent photo-op with Arab leaders in Warsaw was a reminder to voters that his outreach to such states has not been futile.

Finally, Netanyahu is likely counting on political math to work in his favor. No Israeli party has ever received a sixty-one-seat majority on its own to form a government without cobbling together a coalition. It is telling that Blue and White's initial poll lead does not translate into a major shift of the center-right and center voter blocs, where the right-wing camp still holds a narrow lead. Moreover, there is a structural asymmetry to Israeli politics. The right-of-center bloc can woo ultraorthodox voters by allying with parties further to the right, but the center-left cannot attract many Israeli Arab voters further to the left—partly because Arab parties are reticent to join a coalition, and also because center-left parties fear that Arab parties would alienate Jewish voters.

In the end, it is unclear which of these dueling narratives will prevail. Speculation about Mandelblit's looming announcement has been rising; whatever he concludes, the coming days may provide a big boost to one side or the other.

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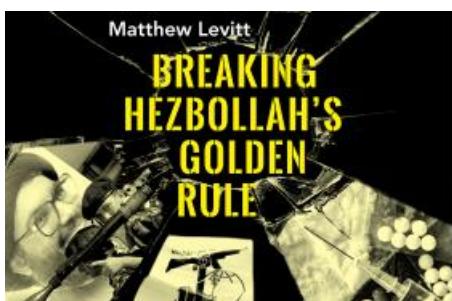
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