



The Crumbling Israeli Left-Wing and Netanyahu's Power

by [Ilyssa Tuttelman](#)

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Brief Analysis

Background: The Infallible Israeli Right-Wing

As Israel faces an election due in 2019, the factors that have caused the deterioration of the Israeli left will likely inhibit their ability to take the majority from the right-wing Likud. Since 2009, Likud chairman Benjamin Netanyahu has held onto power as the Prime Minister of Israel. Prior to this government, there were predominantly Prime Ministers from unity governments, making Netanyahu the most right-wing government formed. In the last Knesset election of [2015](#), the Likud party won thirty seats and right-wing Isaac Herzog's Zionist Union party won twenty-four.

From the 18th Knesset election of [2009](#) to the current [20th](#) Knesset, Likud and its coalition has slowly risen from twenty-seven seats to thirty. In the last Knesset election, the Zionist Union took 24 seats. [March 2018](#) polls showed that out of 120 seats, Likud would win thirty-two Knesset seats, followed by centrist Yesh Atid with twenty-one, the Joint Arab List with twelve, and Zionist Union would win twelve. This outcome has strong implications on the United States and its role in the Middle East peace process and upcoming decisions to intervene in crises in the region, as President Trump and Netanyahu maintain close ties.

The Source of Netanyahu's Strength

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is the logical national security candidate for Israel and a function of geopolitical circumstance. This is due in part to the success of his geopolitical aspirations and the strength of his relationship with the United States. The events of April and May 2018: [his presentation](#) on the JCPOA, the [strikes](#) in Syria, etc. diverted the attention of Israeli voters from rumors of his [February 2018](#) indictments and economic troubles to the successes of these endeavors. This reinforces Netanyahu's belief that he has no equal on the national security stage. While there may be a lot of fatigue with Netanyahu's leadership, it does not result in wanting to replace him as Israelis see nobody else appears able to take on the challenge of facing Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas.

After Trump announced the United States withdrawal from the Israeli-opposed Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on May 8, Netanyahu's Likud party was [predicted](#) to gain more seats in an election. The prediction of a jump from

current thirty Knesset seats to forty-two seats indicates that the close relations between Netanyahu and Trump can further solidify the dominance of the right-wing in Israeli politics. Yair Lapid, the former Israeli Finance Minister and current centrist-party: Yesh Atid leader, disagreed with the Netanyahu supported U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA. In the wake of the withdrawal he commented [that](#), “Had I been prime minister, I would sit with European leaders in closed forums and present the material to them.” However, the ultimate withdrawal aided Netanyahu’s numbers in predicted elections.

In the prelude to the U.S. moving its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem on May 14, it was found that 63 percent of Israelis believed it would be for Israel’s best interest and 68 percent of Israeli Jews did as well. Thus, only helping Netanyahu’s predicted election results. It is important to note that the geopolitical landscape could very well revert back to the mean by election day, given the dizzying pace of events in the Middle East.

The Impact of Domestic Issues and Voter Demographics

As Netanyahu faces allegations and scandals – will the right lose its faith in its leader? The [February 2018](#) rumors of his indictment and the police investigations of Netanyahu are bound to be impacted by the Attorney-General’s rulings: did Netanyahu engage in bribery or a lesser charge? We do not know yet. The Peace Index [polled](#) Israelis based on political affiliation from March 13-14 on their support of the Prime Minister in light of these accusations. They found that 59 percent of Israeli Jews do not believe in his innocence and 52 percent of the right wing believe his statement [that](#) “There will be nothing [found] because there is nothing.” However, 55 percent, the majority of his right-wing following continue to support him despite the public discourse. In order to continue maintaining political support as the election approaches, Netanyahu reversed his [plan](#) to resettle 38,000 African migrants on April 2; arguably, to appease his constituents and voters overall.

Despite controversies and allegations against Netanyahu, the left-wing is likely to not form a uniform enough message between party leaders, while simultaneously overcoming the growing religious share of votes and Arab party alliances, to win more seats than the right in the 21st Knesset. Professor and editor of Israeli survey, the Peace Index, Tamar Hermann [explained](#) in April 2017: “The rate of support for anything that is not right wing or right of center is so small that [the survey results] don’t seem to have to do with any particular party, but just a particular outlook.”

Arab voter turnout is also a factor decreasing the left-wing’s strength. Arabs are excluded from certain coalitions and forced to create their own faction: the Arab-dominated alliance, Joint List. In the [2015 election](#), right-wing Likud won 30, left-wing Zionist Camp won twenty-four, and Joint List earned thirteen Knesset seats. The growing religious Jewish voters are taking increasing numbers of the [vote](#) in elections. Prior to the 2013 election of the 19th Knesset, 41 percent of religious Jews were polled as intending to vote for Naftali Bennett of the right-wing Jewish Home Party. This was followed by 25 percent undecided and 19 percent Likud-Beytenu. [In the election](#), Likud Yisrael Beiteinu won 31 seats, centrist Yesh Atid led by Yair Lapid won nineteen, and the Labor Party won just fifteen.

The Left’s Weaknesses

Not only has the right risen to prominence, the left continues to remain divided and confused. When President Trump announced the decision to move the United States embassy to Jerusalem, Labor party leader Avi Gabbay [stated](#): “a united Jerusalem is even more important than peace.” While Gabbay’s fellow leftist politicians agree with the goal of a unified Jerusalem, they also prioritize a peace agreement with the Palestinians. This small, yet important divergence in the distinction of Jerusalem is a source of contention amongst left leaders. His leftist [peers](#): former Meretz Party chairperson, Zehava Galon, and Joint List leader, Ayman Odeh, fear the implications of the embassy move and a change in Jerusalem’s distinction on the global stage. They worry that the United States recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel could prevent a peace agreement with the Palestinians, in addition to

inhibiting a uniformed, copacetic Jerusalem.

Tel Aviv University Professor Aviad Kleinberg, a center-leftist, [summarized](#) many Left-wing Israeli Jews feelings about the left in October 2017: “If this is the Left’s leader, why not just vote for the Right? I’d like to hope Gabbay isn’t a rightist. I’d like to hope he understands that you can’t rise to power by ideologically destroying your own camp. We’ll wait and see.” Gabbay has pulled to the right, treading the line of the political spectrum. In November 2017 during a speech at Ben-Gurion University, he [stated](#): “I didn’t turn right of left, that’s simply not true.” In addition to a comment [that](#) “the Left forgot what it is to be Jews.” Gabbay is not the first left politician to diverge from the party and confuse the left-wing Israelis. In [February 2016](#), leftist Isaac Herzog emphasized the support of a unilateral Israeli disengagement plan from the West Bank. While the plan, which aimed to promote peace and coexistence with the Palestinians, is a leftist ambition, it has right-wing roots. In December 2017, Israelis were [polled](#) about their confidence in Netanyahu or Gabbay as Prime Minister of Israel. Thirty-nine percent picked Netanyahu and 19 percent chose Gabbay as a Prime Minister candidate.

A Way to Defeat the Right?

A solution to take the dominance away from the right-wing would be a left coalition with other parties – most realistically, the centrists. In 2017, Labor chairman, Gabbay, [rejected](#) the concept of a coalition with the Joint List: “I do not see anything that connects us to them or allows us to be in the same government with them.” Instead, a feasible coalition between the left-wing and the centrists could provide a formidable force against the left-wing. A May 9 [poll](#) found Likud would have thirty-six seats, Yesh Atid seventeen, Joint List twelve and Zionist Union ten. A hypothetical coalition between Yesh Atid and Zionist Union would earn twenty-seven seats, not enough to overtake Netanyahu’s Likud, but provide strong competition.

Alternatively, Yesh Atid could seek possible [alignments](#) with Netanyahu’s Likud party that would not overcome the right-wing entirely but begin by diluting its steady-fast ideologies. The Zionist Union party even claimed that Yesh Atid would create a future coalition with Netanyahu despite his indictments. Lapid responded to these statements via Twitter: “To anyone who didn’t understand and mainly to those who insisted on not understanding: Yesh Atid will not be part of any government in which the prime minister faces an indictment.”

Moreover, the terms of the Left, Center and Right-wing parties in Israel are somewhat fluid in light of the lack of a clear choice for a peace treaty with the Palestinians. As a result, the Left has sustained losses as it is designated as a party of negotiations yet has no successful ones. This further hurts the Left-wing as Israelis are forced to ask themselves: should we maintain the viability for two states in the future if leaders cannot reach an agreement on it today?

The left-wing of Israeli politics faces continuous difficulties defeating the right-wing. These will remain unless a leftist party is able to successfully form a coalition to defeat Likud. However, given the decline of the political left and that the Israeli-Arab parties cannot or will not form coalitions, Yesh Atid and the Labor party are left attempting to win over the ‘light-right’ voters. Could Moshe “Bogie” Yaalon bolster the credentials of Lapid to woo the light-right voters? In January 2018 he [explained](#) that he wants to aim to be the highest power, Prime Minister, to benefit the national interests of Israel. He described that, “Part of what I’m doing these days, in addition to stumping the country so people can get to know me, is meeting with heads of political movements, party leaders, to see what the common denominator can be.” When compared to the political persuasion of Gabbay and Lapid, Yaalon was quite confident and said that while they fight within themselves over who has more experience, they do not with him. Although this is a seemingly daunting task, forming a strong coalition, such as one between Yaalon and Lapid amongst left and center parties has strong potential to challenge Netanyahu’s dominance. Thus, creating opportunities for major shifts within Israeli relations internally and externally. ❖



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