

Implications of Israel's New Cabinet

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Brief Analysis

A look at the major incoming players in the new Israeli government and where they stand on Iran, the Palestinians, and other key issues.

Now that President Obama has completed his visit to Israel, Israelis will return their focus to those figures who will play a significant role in the country's new government. With the governing coalition consisting of 68 members out of 120 Knesset members in total, certain ministers will shape key foreign policy decisions, and some of these ministers have little foreign policy experience. The list that follows gives a sense of the major incoming players and how they stand on issues ranging from the Iran nuclear crisis to relations with the Palestinians.

DEFENSE MINISTER MOSHE (BOGIE) YAALON

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) chief of staff during the second Palestinian intifada, Yaalon is considered one of the few potential successors to Binyamin Netanyahu within the Likud. On the Iran issue, Yaalon is considered less enthusiastic about the idea of a unilateral strike than his predecessor, Ehud Barak. Along with Dan Meridor and Benny Begin, Yaalon was seen as a skeptic regarding such a strike within the "octet," as the members of Netanyahu's weekly national security forum on Iran are known. Yaalon's preference seemingly would be ratcheted-up sanctions and a full trade embargo enforced by the international community -- if possible, before Iran's June election. If, however, diplomacy, sanctions, and U.S. efforts are unsuccessful, Yaalon views the use of Israeli force as a last resort. Accordingly, Yaalon is not a proponent of containment -- the idea that Israel can live with an Iran with a nuclear bomb.

With the newly formed government, and the loss of experienced foreign policy hands, Netanyahu and Yaalon will be among the only ministers remaining from the previous octet and who are well versed on the Iran issue. And since the prime minister and new defense minister potentially hold different views on the matter, one cannot be sure who will have the advantage. The apparent split may indeed strengthen the Israeli security establishment, which favors close security links with the United States.

On the Palestinian issue, Yaalon has long been a critic of Palestinian behavior, ever since his insistence in the mid-1990s, when heading the IDF's Directorate of Military Intelligence, that Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat lied to him. His overarching view is that the world creates excuses for Palestinian misbehavior, and his office has become a magnet within the Israeli government for those alleging Palestinian incitement. Further perturbing Yaalon is the refusal by Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas to state his commitment, as he has in the past, to "two states for two peoples" -- a statement that would tacitly acknowledge Jewish self-determination alongside a Palestinian state. However, if Yaalon could be persuaded that the Palestinian Authority (PA) is indeed committed to a reciprocal course, some believe he might soften his support of West Bank settlements. If he is not persuaded in this direction, Yaalon can be expected to be a greater supporter of settlements than his predecessor, Barak.

FINANCE MINISTER YAIR LAPID

Deemed the election's biggest winner, Lapid's centrist party Yesh Atid (There Is a Future) came from nowhere to win nineteen seats. Lapid did especially well in greater Tel Aviv, articulating a vision of Israel as a normal Western country where free-market reforms protect the middle class. Furthermore, Lapid insisted upon Israel's ability to integrate the ultraorthodox into the military and workforce, believing such a step was needed to wean this sector from its status as Israel's premier welfare class and ensure greater societal burden sharing.

In his major foreign policy speech of the campaign, given in the settlement of Ariel, Lapid argued that negotiations with the Palestinians were critical, not as a tactic but rather "as a strategy" that would have an impact on Israel for generations. He gave the speech in a settlement because he thought the settlers should know his position. In the speech, after saying that the Palestinians deserved criticism for missing past opportunities for peace, Lapid stated that there were negative demographic trends: "Other people live in these landscapes, and in a few years we will lose the Jewish majority. Those who turn away from this fact, those who ignore it, endanger the Zionist enterprise." In the same speech, he called for Israel to maintain all of Jerusalem and to do everything in its power to repair its relationship with Turkey.

Lapid, who came to power on a wave of discontented calls for domestic change, will probably view the Obama visit as reinforcement for his belief that Israel must do all in its power to avoid international isolation.

MINISTER OF INDUSTRY, TRADE, AND LABOR NAFTALI BENNETT

A former top aide to Netanyahu, Bennett is the son of immigrants from the San Francisco area and just forty years old. He made million of dollars as a software entrepreneur and is a former leader of the settlement movement.

Bennett's pro-settler Habayit Hayehudi (Israel Is Our Home) Party won twelve seats in the election. Bennett himself has emerged as the kingmaker in the current government, largely through his role as a bridge between its religious nationalist and secular forces, with their focus on market reforms and greater burden sharing for the ultraorthodox through integration into the military and workforce. When the government was being formed, Bennett refused countless appeals by Netanyahu to peel away from Lapid in order to bring the ultraorthodox into the government. These refusals can be attributed in part to Netanyahu's pre- and postelection snubs of Bennett, but they are also reflected in the increasing affluence and integration of the modern orthodox in Israeli society, both professionally and geographically.

The Lapid-Bennett alliance will likely constitute the central axis of the new government, with only the settlement issue to potentially drive the two apart. Yet even allowing for arguments that Bennett holds the balance of power in the new government, Labor leader Shelly Yachimovich, with her fifteen-member faction, has offered to join the coalition if Bennett leaves in protest over concessions to the Palestinians.

HOUSING MINISTER URI ARIEL

A member of Bennett's party and a leader of the settlement movement, Ariel is expected to use the housing ministry to provide financial resources to the settlements. Another settler, Nissan Smoliansky, will be Knesset finance chairman. In the last government, both posts were held by ultraorthodox figures, who used their positions to assist the ultraorthodox sector.

JUSTICE MINISTER TZIPI LIVNI

The foreign minister during Ehud Olmert's government, Livni won six seats on a platform focused on a two-state solution and has been given the portfolio by Netanyahu to negotiate with the Palestinians, who respect her. She said she was inspired by Obama's public speech to students in Jerusalem, terming it a "Zionist vision."

While some suspect that Livni will be outmaneuvered by the new government's right-of-center elements, she herself has expressed the belief that Netanyahu passed a first test by not succumbing to pressure from the right to rescind her status as chief negotiator. Low expectations and the lack of formal negotiations could work to Livni's advantage in her dealings with the Palestinians, enabling her to quietly hold detailed exploratory talks with Abbas. The possibility also exists that Livni will emerge with the "American portfolio," held by Barak in the previous government (despite his hawkishness on Iran), given her moderate views on Palestinian issues. Indications suggest that Netanyahu will view favorably her frequent travel to both Washington and other international capitals.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, INTELLIGENCE, AND STRATEGIC AFFAIRS MINISTER YUVAL STEINITZ

While this new ministry was simply cobbled together for the former finance minister and Netanyahu acolyte, Yuval Steinitz, this -- a former academic -- could be a dark horse, given his membership in the octet. If the legal troubles of recent foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman linger (Netanyahu now holds foreign minister post), Steinitz could benefit from the vacuum at Israel's Foreign Ministry.

THE NETANYAHU FACTOR

At his joint press conference with Obama in Jerusalem, Netanyahu quipped that second-term American presidents and third-term Israeli prime ministers can achieve things that others cannot. This may have been a rare focus on legacy for Netanyahu, who after being weakened in the last elections could be serving his last term. It is interesting that both Yitzhak Rabin and Ariel Sharon moderated their positions on the Palestinian issue as they advanced in age and tenure in office. Will Netanyahu, in turn, support a stoppage of settlements beyond Israel's security barrier and instead only back settlement blocs largely adjacent to the pre-1967 line? It is unclear if Netanyahu will ask for some form of Palestinian reciprocity, such as an explicit commitment to the formulation of two states for two peoples.

On Iran, Netanyahu feels vindicated that his redline articulated this past fall at the United Nations has led Tehran to recently divert enriched uranium from its nuclear program. One wonders if Netanyahu will redouble his efforts to urge Obama to declare his redline as well, at least in private.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES

As noted, the Israeli government's loss of high-level figures with foreign policy experience will mean Netanyahu and Yaalon will be preeminent in discussions on Iran. On the Palestinian and settlement issues, major clashes are bound to occur, with Bennett and Ariel on one side and Livni and Lapid on the other. For Yaalon's part, his instinctive support for the settlers could be tempered not just by ameliorative Palestinian statements but also by a legacy shared by Israeli defense ministers of seeking strategic cooperation with the United States.

The Israeli government's divisions and lack of foreign policy experience seem to vindicate the Pentagon's focus on tight consultations with the Israeli security establishment, which shares a desire for such close coordination. The divisions have probably reinforced Obama's decision to reach out to the Israeli public and Netanyahu alike, gestures that could serve as a brake on unilateral Israeli action on both the Iranian and Palestinian fronts.

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