

# Netanyahu Forced to Rethink His Coalition

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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**Israel's next government will likely come together on a platform of increasing ultraorthodox burden sharing and, perhaps, more short-term flexibility on Palestinian negotiations, but tensions regarding final disposition of the West Bank could tear it apart down the road.**

**F**or the first time since Israel's January 22 election, the probable contours of a new government led by incumbent Binyamin Netanyahu are finally coming into view. This weekend, President Shimon Peres granted him the maximal two-week extension to shape a new coalition, moving the legal deadline to March 16. It now seems increasingly likely that Netanyahu's Likud Party will form a coalition with the election's two most significant success stories: the center-left Yesh Atid ("There Is a Future") Party of journalist Yair Lapid and the far-right Jewish Home Party of Naftali Bennett.

The central drama since January has been Bennett and Lapid's determination to preserve their political alliance, scuttling Netanyahu's plan to retain loyal ultraorthodox parties as a key part of his coalition. As a result, Israel could be entering its first government without ultraorthodox participation since 2003. Even if ultraorthodox parties are included, their core demands will be sidelined for now; in fact, the new government's first order of business may well be legislation to gradually and forcibly integrate ultraorthodox Jews into the military. In the longer term, however, the stability of such a government would be tested once the Palestinian issue resurfaces, since that is where the differences between Lapid and Bennett are strongest.

## NETANYAHU'S SURPRISE

**N**etanyahu's inability to break the Lapid-Bennett alliance has been the biggest surprise of the postelection period. Initially, he had expected to muster a bare majority in the Knesset by bringing together his Likud (31 seats) and ultraorthodox (18) supporters along with former personal chief of staff and right-wing party leader Bennett (12). This 61-seat share of the 120-member Knesset would have enabled him to dictate terms to Lapid (19) after the election.

Netanyahu believed that a neophyte politician like Bennett would be unable to resist the pressure to join a right-wing government, but Jewish Home's strong electoral showing -- the best by religious Zionists since 1977 -- has helped him hold fast.

Some have speculated that Bennett is motivated by personal pique at his old boss, given that he has publicly accused the Likud of smearing his party during the campaign. Yet far deeper forces are also at work. Bennett's modern orthodox supporters are becoming increasingly interchangeable with Israel's secular elite, at least in terms of professional and military integration. Their rank and file aspire to the same socioeconomic status as secular constituencies, making them very receptive to Lapid's message about using market reforms to help the middle class. They also agree with Lapid's critique of "burden sharing" -- they believe it is both morally unjust and economically unaffordable to continue exempting the ultraorthodox from the perils of military service while providing them with needless welfare that enables them to avoid full integration into the workforce.

Furthermore, the modern orthodox have long chafed at their treatment at the hands of the ultraorthodox, who have leveraged their political clout in past governments to take over the crown jewel of the modern orthodox, the Chief Rabbinate. Indeed, ultraorthodox rabbis are often contemptuous of modern religious leadership. Yet the latest developments seem to signal a historic shift, with the religious and secular joining hands to demand that Israel no longer provide largesse that insulates the ultraorthodox from the requirements of modern life. This is also the first time in years that modern orthodox Knesset members from various parties outnumber the ultraorthodox members (20 to 18).

Netanyahu went to extraordinary lengths to avoid this situation. The ultraorthodox have been loyal to him since he first became premier in 1996, giving him a free hand to run the country as they received subsidies for their religious institutions and lifestyle. By all accounts, he sought to secure their centrality in the next government by asking Labor Party leader Shelly Yachimovich to be finance minister, which would have created a coalition that excluded Lapid and Bennett. Although her avowed social-democrat views clashed with Netanyahu's proud commitment to the free market, he viewed such a move as preferable to losing his loyal ultraorthodox allies.

Yet Netanyahu now seems to have acquiesced to the Lapid-Bennett alliance. First, Yachimovich refused his offer, believing that their differences on socioeconomic issues were fundamentally unbridgeable. And earlier this week, two ultraorthodox parties -- Shas (11 seats) and United Torah Judaism (7) -- announced that they will join the opposition. Failure to form a government by March 16 would mean new elections, which Netanyahu now believes he cannot afford: since January, he has been depicted as the architect and defender of the old order, while Lapid and Bennett have surged in recent polls for their willingness to resist pressure and stand on principle.

## **MANY ISSUES TO RESOLVE**

**M**uch bargaining will have to be completed in the days ahead before a Netanyahu-Lapid-Bennett government can be finalized. Unresolved issues range from the detailed principles undergirding new ultraorthodox legislation to the contentious distribution of sensitive cabinet portfolios.

For example, current foreign minister Avigdor Liberman has publicly stated that he was promised the same post in the next government, but the situation could change if his ongoing personal legal issues persist. In that case, Netanyahu might choose Lapid as foreign minister instead, which could help Israel project a more moderate image abroad. In addition, while Shas has ruled out joining the government for now given the looming ultraorthodox legislation, one cannot dismiss the possibility of last-minute efforts to recruit them once a coalition is in place, since this would give them (limited) clout to preserve their privileges.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY**

resident Obama's upcoming trip to Israel is scheduled for March 20-21, just after the government formation

**P** deadline, so the current blurriness regarding Israel's foreign policy should come into focus somewhat before then. On the Iranian nuclear issue, Netanyahu's inner circle of eight ministers will no longer include two key skeptics of Israeli military action, Dan Meridor and Benny Begin; one key advocate of a strike, Ehud Barak, may be gone as well. The addition of two neophytes could strengthen the military establishment, which wants to work with the United States as much as possible unless it begins to feel isolated and compelled to attack. Yet such an addition could also strengthen Netanyahu (who has long advocated a strike) by creating an inner circle that is less experienced than him on security matters. A more definitive judgment will be possible by March 16, once Israel's next defense minister is appointed. Although Barak is not the odds-on favorite (current speculation focuses on Netanyahu's deputy and former military chief of staff Moshe Yaalon), one cannot rule out him being asked to return, which would make him the first defense minister to serve without a party.

On the Palestinian issue, a 70-plus-seat Netanyahu-Lapid-Bennett coalition would likely include some 27 members who do not hail from the right: namely, the factions led by Lapid (19 members), former foreign minister Tzipi Livni (6), and former chief of staff Shaul Mofaz (2). In theory, this would give Netanyahu more flexibility on the issue, perhaps spurring more gestures to the Palestinians tied to negotiations.

Yet the final fate of the West Bank is a major bone of contention between Lapid and Bennett. Lapid has repeatedly stated that progress with the Palestinians is part of his vision of Israel as a normal Western country, while Bennett wants to annex 60 percent of the West Bank and is at sharp odds with Netanyahu's commitments on this point. Other members of Jewish Home have said they will not interfere with Netanyahu if he seeks to negotiate a two-state solution, but they seem to be betting that such talks will fail, whether due to Palestinian positions or their own refusal to evacuate any Jewish settlements as part of a deal. In any case, with 12 seats in a 70-seat coalition, Bennett's party would have the power to pull the plug on the next government.

Finally, Israel's recent political history holds an illuminating parallel with the current situation. Yair Lapid's meteoric electoral success in January is similar to that enjoyed by his father, Tommy, in 2003. At the time, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was a willing partner with Tommy in excluding the ultraorthodox from government, and 'the elder Lapid moderated in office and enthusiastically supported Gaza disengagement. Yet that same issue suddenly ended his 'political career -- Tommy's party fell apart after Sharon insisted on moving toward the ultraorthodox in order to secure their votes for disengagement, trumping all other calculations.

Then as now, the coalition against the ultraorthodox and the coalition on the Palestinian issue were not identical. Both issues were largely driven by secular forces with different configurations, and they did not have equal priority at the same time. Therefore, even if ultraorthodox mainstay Shas opposes attempts to reform burden sharing in the near term, it could still become a coalition partner down the road if key decisions are required on the Palestinian issue -- especially if Bennett is as assertive in the next government as he has been since January.

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