

# Netanyahu's Not Worried About an Agenda, He's Worried About His Coalition

by [David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

Jan 16, 2013

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations.



Articles & Testimony

---

## This week's Israeli election will not mark the end of this season's political maneuvering, just the end of the beginning.

Anyone waiting to know the agenda of Israel's new government on the morning of January 23 is likely to be sorely disappointed, and not only because it will likely take weeks before we know the coalition's composition. Few overarching debates on policy have materialized during this election campaign. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu does not seem to be seeking any new mandate for action, despite being widely expected to win in most surveys with his right-of-center bloc retaining 65 of 120 seats, a slight drop from previous polls. It is curious that an incumbent, who understands the rough and tumble of policy fights, is not seeking a public mandate for specific policies. In the past decade Israel has had several consequential elections. In 1992, Yitzhak Rabin called for reallocating funds away from constructing West Bank settlements for the purpose of peace with the Palestinians. In 1999, his protege Ehud Barak campaigned on the platform of a final status agreement with the Palestinians. In 2001, after the outbreak of the second intifada, Ariel Sharon made clear that he would end the terror and violence. In 2006, Ehud Olmert explicitly campaigned on the idea of an Israeli pullback in the West Bank.

By contrast, this election has seen no great debate. In part this is because between the five larger parties, only one -- Likud Beitenu -- is likely to get more than a quarter of the votes and even the Likud will not get much more than that. This is certainly not the stuff of great mandates. Even more critical perhaps is the lack of a common agenda between the parties: one seems to play soccer while another plays football, even as a third plays basketball. Labor, for instance, has focused on income inequality. Yair Lapid's "There Is a Future" party has advocated for greater educational opportunities among the middle class and rejects exemption of the ultra-orthodox from military service. Meanwhile, Tzipi Livni's party has sought to revive the peace process with the Palestinians.

Unlike the other parties, Netanyahu has largely avoided specifics. It is striking how few critical issues he has raised in the course of the campaign. This is the first election in Israel since the Arab upheaval began, but he has

mentioned neither the shifting regional landscape nor future relations with Egypt in the post-Mubarak era. He has not raised Israel becoming a de facto bilateral state in absence of peace talks with the Palestinians, even when Israeli President Shimon Peres makes statements that the absence of negotiations will lead to a return to Palestinian terror. Surprisingly, he has not even mentioned the Iranian nuclear threat -- his signature issue during his current tenure as prime minister.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that each of these issues is either too sensitive or too painful for Netanyahu to discuss. Consequential elections in the past have revolved around Israel's willingness to initiate a diplomatic process, but Netanyahu's message to the public seems to be that the issues are too large for one election to handle. On some level this makes sense. On Egypt, for instance, he may believe that relations with the Muslim Brotherhood in Cairo are too sensitive for a public discussion; on the Palestinian issue, he likely prefers to keep the onus on Abbas for not agreeing to sit down with Israel and negotiate, saying the price for talks of a settlement freeze is an unacceptable precondition. He knows his reliance on the U.S. and a more-right leaning Likud list are at odds. Specifically, the U.S. will want him to make concessions to the Palestinians, and the growing right-wing elements within the Likud and to its right will want him not to do so for a variety of reasons, including the ascendancy of a militant Hamas. On Iran, he has likely seen polling suggesting Israelis favor a U.S. strike on Iran more than an Israeli one. Nevertheless, there is much that could be discussed: With regards to Iran, for instance, there has been little debate during the campaign about what happens if diplomacy fails and the United States does not handle the issue.

Despite the rightward swing that has emerged within Netanyahu's right-wing bloc, the lack of overall policy debate means Netanyahu may have more flexibility when it comes to deciding upon coalition partners. He could go center and see if at least some interim territorial moves with the Palestinians in the West Bank are possible that are consistent with his professed commitment to a two-state solution, or he could go right along with those who seek to bury it. Key to sensing Netanyahu's direction will be whether he retains a moderate defense minister like Ehud Barak or names Livni as his foreign minister.

If past is prologue, Netanyahu will likely favor broader coalitions that limit the ability of any single party to threaten the stability of his government. He will also avoid allowing center-left parties to outnumber Likud members and will not abandon the ultra-orthodox who have been with him since the start of his career. In fact, the cautious Netanyahu will first use the day after the election to ensure that none of the ultra-orthodox parties outflank him by cutting a deal with his main rivals. The odds are that they would not abandon him anyway, but Netanyahu will want to be certain. Once he achieves what is known as a "blocking majority" of ensuring the ultra-orthodox parties do not cut a deal with his rivals, the price he ultimately pays his natural coalition partners drops.

With roughly 50 seats between Likud and the ultra-orthodox, Netanyahu will not be hard pressed to reach a parliamentary majority of 61 seats. He will then have the freedom of choosing between Livni's centrism and Naftali Bennett's success as the junior foreign policy partner. For its part, due to a slide in the polls, Labor has ruled out any coalition with Netanyahu at its head. In order not to be dependent upon Livni -- whom he does not like -- he might urge Lapid to reconsider his decision not to sit with ultra-orthodox parties until an acceptable agreement on ultra-orthodox military conscription has been reached. Some, however, will argue that in light of his options, Netanyahu is unlikely to take the centrist course, and that a move to the right within Israel will force him to choose Bennett, who, with up to 14 seats, has been the star of the election campaign (although this is still less than half the amount Netanyahu attracts).

Although Bennett's rise is interesting for a variety of reasons, it does not make Israel's trajectory a foregone conclusion. Of course, this election would be much simpler if one could know its direction as soon as the balloting was over. The lack of a mandate during this campaign, however, will mean that Netanyahu will once again do what he likes doing best: namely, keeping all the options open as he forms a government and decides on key ministerial

posts as those in Washington and other world capitals watch in earnest. Consequently, the January 22 election is not the end of this season's political maneuvering, but probably just the end of the beginning.

*David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow and director of the Project on the Middle East Peace Process at The Washington Institute.* ❖

*New Republic*

---

## RECOMMENDED

---

### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



### ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

#### [How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

## TOPICS

[Arab-Israeli Relations \(/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations\)](/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations)

[Peace Process \(/policy-analysis/peace-process\)](/policy-analysis/peace-process)

## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Israel \(/policy-analysis/israel\)](/policy-analysis/israel)

[Palestinians \(/policy-analysis/palestinians\)](/policy-analysis/palestinians)