

# Netanyahu Solidifies Lead in Israeli Campaign

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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**As the projected makeup of the leading faction in Israel's next government becomes increasingly clear, Washington should begin considering what it might mean for U.S. policy.**

**D**espite a military confrontation in Gaza, a UN vote to upgrade the Palestinian Authority's status, and a controversial West Bank settlement announcement, the overall contours of Israel's parliamentary elections have not shifted in advance of the January 22 balloting. As it stands, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's coalition is likely to win by a comfortable margin, and the manner in which various political blocs and key ministers are positioning themselves offers important insights.

## WHY NETANYAHU IS LEADING

**N**etanyahu's theme -- that he is the best choice to protect the country against regional threats -- resonates strongly with many voters, especially at a time when they believe that Israeli initiatives will not be decisive in reshaping a region that remains engulfed in turmoil. They are well aware of the slaughter in Syria, the upheaval in Egypt, and Hamas leader Khaled Mashal's latest declaration that he will never recognize Israel and will liberate Palestine "inch by inch." They also remember that PA president Mahmoud Abbas accused Israel of "ethnic cleansing" during his recent remarks at the UN, and that he has failed to meet with Netanyahu since September 2010.

All of these Arab trends tend to reinforce Netanyahu's darker view of the region's direction, and his aides have declared that there is "no partner" for peace (though Abbas did publicly condemn Mashal's declaration after Netanyahu chastised him for remaining silent on the subject). Interestingly, however, the prime minister has not focused publicly on potential military strikes against Iran's nuclear program, since many voters seem to prefer that the United States take the lead on any such action rather than Israel.

## MANEUVERING ON THE RIGHT

**A**nalyzing an Israeli election means looking not so much at individual parties, but rather at blocs of parties that tend to cluster together. Thus, if the latest projections hold, the right-of-center parties that constitute most of the current government would win a 68-52 edge in the 120-member Knesset -- the same overall figure found in early October surveys conducted by polling firm Dialog on behalf of *Haaretz* newspaper. In other words, while there has been movement within each rival bloc over the past two months, there is no movement between them.

For his part, Netanyahu has trumpeted the importance of unifying parties. In late October, he merged his Likud faction with Yisrael Beitenu (Israel Our Home), a largely Russian immigrant party led by Foreign Minister Avigdor Liberman. At the time, Netanyahu had expected center-left parties to merge and announced his own move as a preemptive strike. The decision has raised speculation that Liberman will become the new Likud-Beitenu standard bearer should Netanyahu retire.

The merger has not helped the two parties' joint polling prospects -- separately, they were projected to win a total of 44 seats in October, but today they are polling at 39. Yet the bloc's ideological composition is more revealing than the loss of a few seats. The latest Likud-Beitenu list is more right leaning than the one that prevailed in 2009. According to a U.S. official, only two of its top twenty-eight members support a two-state solution with the Palestinians -- one of them is Netanyahu, and the other is a back-bencher named Shama Hacoen. Whether their objections to Palestinian statehood are security-related or religious, the end result is the same.

Meanwhile, three Likud members who are associated with relatively moderate views -- Dan Meridor, Michael Eitan, and Benny Begin -- did not even make it onto the party's list. All three are known to be cautious about the use of force. And although Begin is not a dove, he has called for moving unauthorized West Bank settler outposts. Like Meridor, he was also a member of the "octet," the wide-ranging consultative forum Netanyahu regularly held with the most senior cabinet ministers. One of the candidates taking their place on the Likud list was Moshe Feiglin, whose radical platform calls for Israeli Arab citizens to voluntarily deport themselves, among other things.

At least in the short term, Likud may have lost seats to Jewish Home, a pro-settler party that urged a ground attack in Gaza to root out Hamas. An amalgam of religious Zionists, the party has shot up to 11 seats in the latest polls. This may explain why, in the aftermath of the November 29 UN vote on Palestine, Netanyahu pushed for settlement planning (albeit not construction) northeast of Jerusalem, in the controversial 4.5-square-mile area designated "E-1." From Israel's perspective, this area connects the large Maale Adumim settlement cluster, while Palestinians see it as a vital part of their future state's north-south contiguity.

By focusing on planning rather than construction, Netanyahu may believe he can maintain support among elements in the center as he woos back right-wingers attracted to Jewish Home. Yet his E-1 announcement has come at a considerable diplomatic price. Washington and Europe, which publicly backed him during the Hamas crisis, saw the move as decidedly ungrateful, in addition to its impact on Palestinian contiguity.

## **FRAGMENTATION ON THE CENTER-LEFT**

**I**n contrast to Netanyahu's merger, efforts to unite center-left parties have floundered thus far, drastically hurting their prospects. Moreover, this election is unique by Israeli standards because it lacks an agreed campaign agenda. While Netanyahu focuses on regional threats, two of the other major parties are emphasizing different issues.

First, the Labor Party's current platform is income inequality -- in a sharp break from its stance since 1948, it is no longer emphasizing foreign policy and defense issues. In the past, Labor was led by dominant security figures such as David Ben-Gurion, Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres, and Ehud Barak. Today, its chair is former talk show host Shelly Yachimovich, who seems to view the party as more of a niche faction than a head-on contender and has not ruled out joining a future Netanyahu government (Labor is currently projected to win 17 seats). Thus far, she has sought to capitalize on the movement that emerged in summer 2011, when thousands of Israelis took to the streets to protest

the country's high cost of living. Yet the public focus on socioeconomic issues fell off somewhat during the Gaza campaign and the UN vote, and Labor has dropped two seats since October.

Another party -- Hatnua (The Movement), led by former foreign minister Tzipi Livni and assembled just before last Friday's election list deadline -- has focused on reaching an understanding with the Palestinians so that Israel can remain a Jewish, democratic state. She does not claim that Abbas is on the verge of signing a grand deal, but rather that Israel should see what is possible with the Palestinians and avoid international condemnation over settlements. Her list, which includes former Labor chairs Amram Mitzna and Amir Peretz, currently stands at 9 seats in the polls.

The main test for Livni, a former Likud minister herself, will be whether she can draw votes from Netanyahu or merely poach from other center-left parties. One such party is led by columnist/talk show host Yair Lapid, who has focused on education and advancing the middle class. Previously, his faction stood at 10 seats, but it shrank to 6 with Livni's sudden entry.

The biggest loser so far, however, is Kadima. The crowning blow to the party was leader Shaul Mofaz's hasty decision to join a unity government with Netanyahu in the spring. Initially, Kadima promised a breakthrough in enlisting the ultraorthodox, but within a couple months, the party realized it had no common ground with Netanyahu, and Mofaz withdrew. Polls indicate that it will virtually disappear after the election, dropping from 28 seats to 2.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

**F**rom the U.S. perspective, the most important outcome of Israel's electoral maneuvering may be its impact on Netanyahu's top cabinet ministers. Defense Minister Ehud Barak -- Washington's primary interlocutor on Iran and a host of other foreign policy and security issues -- has announced his retirement from Knesset campaigning, though he has not ruled out a return to government if invited. Like Meridor and Begin, Barak was part of Netanyahu's "octet" and therefore played a key role in reining in some of the prime minister's controversial decisions. If none of these figures makes it into the next government, Washington is bound to become more concerned about whether Netanyahu will include political opponents in his coalition -- and, if not, whether more "E-1" type moves are ahead. Whatever the case, the overall stasis in the race should prompt U.S. policymakers to look at postelection scenarios sooner rather than later.

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