

New Israeli Government: More Convergence Than Division

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Mar 30, 2009

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

On March 31, Likud Party leader Binyamin Netanyahu will be sworn in as Israel's next prime minister almost a decade after the end of his first premiership. Although American media has focused on the cabinet inclusion of Avigdor Lieberman, the head of the right-wing Yisrael Beiteinu party, the more important policy news is Ehud Barak's continued tenure as defense minister. While Barak and Netanyahu come from different sides of the political aisle, they appear to share common views on Iran, Syria, and the Palestinian Authority (PA). Barak, a familiar figure to senior U.S. officials, may also help Netanyahu avoid escalating tension with Washington.

Composition of the New Government

The Likud-led government will include 69 members of the 120-member Knesset (Israeli parliament) and feature as many as 30 cabinet ministers -- the most in Israeli history. Netanyahu's main failure since the election has been his inability to coax outgoing foreign minister Tzipi Livni, leader of the 28-member Kadima Party, to join his coalition. Livni refused Netanyahu's invitation, citing his unwillingness to commit to peace with the Palestinians based on a two-state solution.

While many American observers have noted the novelty of Lieberman -- the blunt-spoken, controversial head of the Russian immigrant party and the new foreign minister -- and the possibility that he will lead Israel more to the right, Israeli commentators believe he will be less consequential, especially as potential indictments loom on the horizon. In fact, there is reason to believe the anchors of the coalition will be Netanyahu and Labor Party leader Ehud Barak. In Israel, the defense minister is the military governor of the West Bank and wields much greater authority over regional security issues than does the foreign minister, who in the past has often been left out of the decisionmaking process.

Netanyahu and Barak: Commandos Unite

Netanyahu and Barak have many similarities. Both were elected prime minister in the 1990s, and both were soundly defeated in subsequent elections. In the early 1970s, Netanyahu served under Barak in Israel's elite commando unit, Sayeret Matkal. As such, they seem to share a commando view of the world: utter secrecy among a tight circle and utilization of unorthodox methods to reach unswerving goals. Both are known for unusual self-confidence, often seen as arrogance, yet each seems to respect the other as a strategic thinker.

The coalition, of course, is not just a meeting of minds; it serves the political self-interest of both men. Barak needed to join the coalition out of political self-preservation because, in all likelihood, if he had stayed in the opposition he would have been toppled as head of the Labor Party. In the February elections, Barak led Israel's founding party to a new low by finishing in fourth place and saw Kadima take over leadership of Israel's self-proclaimed "peace camp." By adding Barak to a government vague on the Palestinian issue, Netanyahu undermines Labor's identity as an ideological alternative. At the same time, Netanyahu will point to Barak as a way of blunting opposition attacks by Livni that his government is not supportive enough of peace. By widening the base of his government, Netanyahu loosens his dependence on junior coalition members. If he adds the United Torah Judaism party as expected, his coalition will have 74 members, meaning that even Labor's departure would not deny him a parliamentary majority. Moreover, the opposition will be

somewhat divided between those to Netanyahu's left and a pro-settler National Union faction to the right, a group that believes Netanyahu is not sufficiently committed to the settler enterprise.

Regional Issues

Although they come from different sides of the political aisle, Netanyahu and Barak seem to share common views on a number of key issues. In fact, the only consequential issue where they appear to differ is how to proceed in Gaza.

Iran. The combination of Netanyahu and Barak raises speculation that Israel might launch a military raid against Iranian nuclear facilities if U.S.-Iranian diplomacy fails. Opposition to Iran as a nuclear state is a consensus issue inside Israel, making it easier for the two should they pursue this strategy. Since Israel knows that it cannot stymie the impending U.S.-Iranian dialogue, it will seek to persuade Washington that the talks should be limited in time rather than open-ended, which would enable Tehran to "run out the clock" while it completes its nuclear program.

Syria. Both Netanyahu and Barak tried to reach breakthrough agreements with Damascus in the late 1990s, only to come up short. It is possible they will try again. Netanyahu used a back channel through an American businessman in 1998, but the deal was killed by Ariel Sharon, who was a leading figure in the Netanyahu government at the time. Barak tried U.S. mediation efforts, only to see the undertaking fall short in March 2000 because of a dispute over a few hundred yards of territory adjoining the Sea of Galilee. The two likely share the view of top members of the Israeli military brass that peace talks should be pursued to break up the regional axis comprising secular-led Syria and the Islamist-led Iran and Hizballah.

West Bank. Netanyahu and Barak believe that some final status issues between Israel and the PA cannot be resolved in the current environment, yet both think PA institution building should be pursued. The two, however, face the challenge that PA institution building will not be sustainable over time if the Palestinians and the international community perceive Israel as exploiting the situation to expand existing settlements in a manner that makes a Palestinian state unattainable. Israel denies any nefarious motive and believes its settlement activity is focused in areas that the Palestinians know will become part of Israel in any final agreement. While there is no sign that Netanyahu, Barak, and the United States want to pick a fight over settlements, the challenge for the new Netanyahu government will be to reach an understanding with Washington on the issue. Failure to do so will lead some to question the intentions of the new government. Barak, who has authority over the West Bank and feels he has a close relationship with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, could be a pivotal figure in avoiding bilateral tension.

Economic Policy. Most of the Netanyahu-Barak coalition agreement focused on economics rather than the Arab-Israel conflict. Netanyahu trimmed his free-market program in a move intended to silence the historically active, Labor-affiliated Histadrut trade union. Among other concessions, Netanyahu agreed to extend unemployment benefits, improve elderly subsidies, bolster worker retraining, and create a fund for distressed businesses to avert high unemployment.

Gaza. Differences between Netanyahu and Barak are likely to be most pronounced in their policies toward the Gaza Strip. Netanyahu has publicly repeated his desire to topple Hamas, while Barak, along with Israel's military chief of staff Gabi Ashkenazi, has been more skeptical, believing the PA is not ready to take over in Hamas's absence. It was Barak, in fact, who favored last June's ceasefire with Hamas, an agreement that lasted until December. It will be interesting to see if Netanyahu will return to Gaza's southern corridor to seal up the weapons-smuggling tunnels -- thereby risking renewed conflict -- or whether Barak will steer Israel toward a new, internationally sanctioned ceasefire.

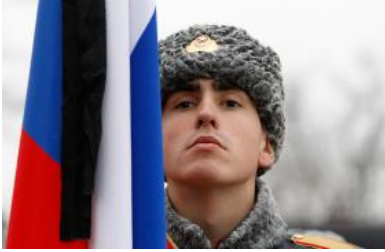
Conclusion

Barak's addition to the Netanyahu government could play a key role in providing balance and stability. The two men have similar views on a variety of issues, and each holds the other in high esteem. Although their relationship could fracture over Gaza or the future of West Bank settlement activity, Barak's inclusion in the government could mitigate potential tension in the U.S.-Israeli relationship.

David Makovsky is a senior fellow and director of The Washington Institute's [Project on the Middle East Peace Process](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=16&newActiveSubNav=Peace%20Process&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D16&newActiveNav=researchAreas) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=16&newActiveSubNav=Peace%20Process&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D16&newActiveNav=researchAreas>)



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