

Elections in Israel 2021

7 February, 2021

Israel is scheduled to hold general elections for a new Knesset on March 23, 2021. The elections were triggered automatically when the outgoing Knesset and government did not manage to agree on and pass a budget within the legally required time. See [here](#) for a detailed explanation of how Israeli elections work prepared by JFNA's Israel office.

Midnight on February 4, 2021 marked the deadline for all parties to submit their final lists of candidates ahead of Election Day. With that milestone now passed, a clearer picture has emerged of who the leading parties will be and the possible election outcomes.

One of the most significant aspects of these elections continues to be the notion of the “electoral threshold.” Under this rule, any party that does not receive at least 3.25% (currently around 130,000 votes) of the national vote is disqualified, and all votes cast for that party are thrown out. With numerous parties polling fairly close to that number, and the overall political map so close, whether or not various parties make it over the 3.25% line will likely determine who emerges from the election with the greatest chance of patching together a coalition and thus forming the new government.

Once final results are known, there are currently three scenarios that are most likely to take place:

1. Current Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud, and the other parties that support him, will receive enough support (a majority; 61 or more seats in the 120-seat Knesset) be able to form a government.
2. The parties opposed to Netanyahu will win more than 61 seats. If that occurs, the new prime minister would likely be either Yesh Atid leader Yair Lapid or former Likud minister Gidon Sa'ar who now leads the New Hope party.
3. Stalemate leading to yet another round of elections.ⁱ

Netanyahu's **Likud** remains the largest party, by far, according to all recent polls that have been conducted. Nonetheless, the current political map does not give Netanyahu a clear path to victory. The **ultra-Orthodox parties**, traditionally close allies of Netanyahu, seem to be retaining their current levels of support.

Further to the right, many point to Netanyahu as a matchmaker who has more or less engineered a merger of three smaller parties, now known as **Religious Zionism**, including the far-right, neo-Kahanist Otzma Yehudit Party led by Itamar Ben Gvir. If this party passes the threshold, it could give Netanyahu the additional few votes needed for him to form a government.

Former defense minister Naftali Bennett's right-wing **Yamina** is the only party that has not ruled out joining a government led by either Netanyahu, or someone from the parties that are opposed to the current prime minister. Yamina is currently polling well and appears will placed to leverage its position post elections to gain maximum promises from the two camps who will be vying for the right-wing party's support.

Yesh Atid, under the leadership of Yair Lapid, has increased its strength in recent weeks, and remains the largest party in the anti-Netanyahu camp, placing the former finance minister as a major contender to become prime minister if Netanyahu cannot form a coalition.

One of the potential game changers in this election is the formation of the **New Hope** party by former Likud minister Gidon Sa'ar. Since breaking from Likud, Sa'ar says that his new party will not sit in a coalition with Netanyahu under any circumstances, and claims to be championing the ideals of the one-time more liberal Likud (while remaining firmly on the right on issues of security and diplomacy). The party's list includes Benny Begin, the son of former Likud Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Michal Diamant, the granddaughter of former Likud Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir. While New Hope is likely to be only the second largest party in the anti-Netanyahu camp, should that group form a government, it is quite likely that Yamina and New Hope join together to press for Gidon Sa'ar to become prime minister, rather than Yair Lapid.

In recent months a slew of smaller parties on the center- left announced they would be standing in the upcoming elections. It was clear from early on that unless a number of these parties merged, some – or even many – would not clear the electoral threshold. In the end, no parties merged, but in the days before the February 5 cut-off date for official party submissions, a number announced they would no longer stand, including former defense minister Moshe (Boogie) Ya'alon's **Telem** Party as well as **The Israelis** party, led by popular Tel Aviv mayor Ron Hulda'i. Remaining in the race are **Meretz**, **Labor** and current Alternate Prime Minister Benny Gantz's **Blue and White** party. All three of these parties are currently polling close to the electoral threshold. The vast majority of politicians who were part of Gantz's party until now, have left, and he enters the upcoming race far weaker than in previous rounds.

Finally, the **Joint Arab List**, an amalgamation of several small Arab parties, has not remained intact, with the **Ra'am** faction announcing that it would run alone. This move will weaken the Arab parties, and can likely help Netanyahu. If Ra'am crosses the electoral threshold the party could potentially support a Netanyahu coalition without formally joining the government. (While Ra'am has major ideological differences with the Israeli right on diplomatic and security issues, being an Islamist party, it finds some common ground with Likud and its partners on social and religious issues). If the party does not cross the threshold, the anti-Netanyahu camp is weakened.

Polls have shown similar results of late. A typical example was conducted by Israel's Channel 12 TV on February 5, 2021, and had the following results (61 needed to form a government):

Parties willing to join a Netanyahu – led coalition		Will only join a coalition without Netanyahu	
Likud (Netanyahu)	29	Yesh Atid (Lapid)	18
Shas (ultra-Orthodox)	8	New Hope (Sa'ar)	14
UTJ (ultra-Orthodox)	8	Yisrael Beiteinu (Lieberman)	7
Religious Zionists	4	Labor	6
TOTAL	49	Meretz	4
		Blue and White (Gantz)	4
		TOTAL	53
Will join either coalition*		Will not join any coalition	
Yamina (Bennett)	11	Joint Arab List	9
(*but unlikely to sit with Meretz or Labor)			

If the above poll reflected actual results, Netanyahu would still fall short (by one) of hitting 61, even with Yamina's 11. In theory the anti-Netanyahu camp would have 64, but that would entail Yamina sitting in a government with Meretz and Labor, a very unlikely possibility.

In other words, the above results would likely result in another stalemate. On the other hand, the numbers are so close that a little movement in either direction could easily tip the scales in favor of one of the candidates.

For more information, please contact JFNA's [Dani Wassner](#), Director of Communications and Government Relations in Israel.

ⁱ An interesting side note: Should stalemates continue, in November 2021 Benny Gantz will automatically become prime minister, if he is still a member of Knesset.