

A New Israeli Government?

7 June, 2021

Barring last minute surprises or developments (always a possibility in Israeli politics), Israel seems set to have a new government in the coming days, marking the end of twelve years of rule by the Likud and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Eight different parties will make up the new coalition, and agreements have been reached among all members. The Knesset must now convene to formally vote in the new government, and that [vote may take place](#) on June 9 or 14 (and must occur before June 24). Once approved by a majority of the Knesset, the new government formally takes power.

The New Government

The likely incoming government will be jointly led by Naftali Bennett (chair of the Yamina Party), who will serve as prime minister for the first two years, and Yair Lapid (chair of the Yesh Atid Party), who will serve as prime minister for the following two years, in what is known as a “Rotation Agreement.” During this time, the other party will be known as the “alternate prime minister,” with far-ranging powers.

The new [coalition](#) is being labelled a “Unity Government” and also a “Government of Change.” It is made up of ideologically disparate partners, who are largely united by their desire to see the end of the Netanyahu-led coalition. One of the features of the new government will be an attempt at parity between the left and right constituents, with each side of the political aisle being given equal strength in the new coalition.

The emerging coalition’s member parties, numbering 61 members of Knesset in total, will be:

RIGHT-LEANING COALITION PARTNERS (19 seats in total)

- Yamina, led by Naftali Bennett. A mixed religious-secular party, often considered to be further right than Netanyahu’s Likud. (7 seats, although [one member](#) has refused to join the government, leaving 6 MKs in the coalition)
- Yisrael Beiteinu, led by Avigdor Liberman. A right-leaning party that attracts many Russian-speaking voters, and is known for its tough stance against the ultra-Orthodox. (7 seats)
- New Hope, led by Gidon Sa’ar. A party whose members mainly broke away from the Likud, in opposition to Netanyahu (6 seats)

CENTRIST COALITION PARTNERS (25 seats in total)

- Yesh Atid, led by Yair Lapid. This is the largest single party in the coalition, by far (17 seats)
- Blue and White, led by current defense minister, Benny Gantz (8 seats)

LEFT-LEANING COALITION PARTNERS (17 seats in total, including Ra’am)

- Labor, led by Meirav Michaeli, the only woman to currently lead a party in the Knesset. The historical leading party of the left in Israel, today has 7 seats
- Meretz, led by Nitzan Horowitz (the first openly gay-person to lead a party in the Knesset), is considered the furthest party to the left in the Knesset. (6 seats)

ARAB COALITION PARTNER

- Ra’am, led by Mansour Abbas, will make history by becoming the first Arab party in Israel’s history to join a coalition (in the past, individual Arab MKs, and even ministers, have served as part of governing coalitions, but only as members of larger parties). Ra’am is an Islamist Party, affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood that has chosen to put aside diplomatic, security and nationalist Palestinian issues in order to focus on seeking gains for Israel’s Arab citizens. (4 seats). See [here](#) for further details.

How did this Government Come About?

- Israel has held four elections in the last two years, and all have ended inconclusively. (See [here](#) for a detailed explanation of how Israeli elections work prepared by JFNA’s Israel office.) This is largely because one camp strongly favored Netanyahu as prime minister, and refused to consider a government without him; and the other camp would not join any government that Netanyahu led. Yet neither side had the numbers to form a coalition (partly because the Joint Arab List would not join either side).
- See full list of the 120 current members of the new Knesset [here](#).
- In the most recent elections, two parties – Bennett’s Yamina and Abbas’ Ra’am – were both willing to sit in a coalition either with, or without, Netanyahu, creating more flexibility.
- A number of leaders, most notably Bennett, announced that they thought that the possibility of a fifth election was worse than any alternative, and were thus able to make significant compromises in order to form a coalition. See [here](#) for an article on Bennett’s willingness to sit in a government with Ra’am.
- Due to his unique position of supporting both sides, Bennett became a kingmaker of sorts, and was able to politically maneuver his way into the position of prime minister, even though he won only 7 out of 120 Knesset seats.
- See [here](#) and [here](#) for comprehensive articles about the probable incoming Prime Minister, Naftali Bennett.

Coalition Challenges

It is clear that such a disparate coalition of parties will face significant challenges, including:

- Parties on the right are being [heavily criticized](#) by many constituents for joining a non-right wing government, especially one where Ra’am and left-leaning parties are partners. Bennett says that there was no option for a right-wing government, and that he was willing to join a coalition under Netanyahu, but the numbers were not there. In an Israeli television interview, Bennett said that he told his children that he “was about to become the most hated person in Israel.”
- Similarly, voters on the left are uncomfortable that their parties have essentially “crowned” Bennett, making him perhaps Israel’s most right-wing prime minister ever.
- Even with all these different parties, the coalition numbers just 61 seats, the barest possible minimum needed to govern. This will make daily life difficult for the coalition and give the opposition opportunities to defeat bills and embarrass the government on a regular basis.
- Any issues that arise dealing with security, diplomacy or the peace process are likely to see significant differences of opinion in the new coalition.

What will happen to Netanyahu and the Parties Currently in Power?

- Despite earlier predictions that he would bow out of politics [if he lost](#), indications now are that Netanyahu will remain head of Likud and serve as Leader of the Opposition. He still has the solid support of a large part of the public, equal to some 30 Knesset seats.
- For now, at least, the Likud will probably not try to replace Netanyahu. Instead, they will take advantage of the precarious nature of the incoming government and try to push for it to fall, triggering new elections, and a chance for them to stage a political comeback.
- The ultra-Orthodox parties will also see themselves out of power, for the first time in many years. The parties are particularly concerned that the likely new finance minister will be Avigdor Liberman, and that he may try to introduce reforms that would be painful for the ultra-Orthodox population (such as decreased childcare allowances). Nonetheless, there are some indications that Lapid and Bennett would like to see the ultra-

Orthodox parties join the coalition at a later date, in order to shore up coalition numbers beyond the current 61. As a result, in the meantime the new coalition may avoid moves that anger the ultra-Orthodox population.

New Ministers

The new ministers in the government are likely to be:

- Prime Minister - Naftali Bennett (Yamina) (and Interior Minister in second half of term)
- Alternate Prime Minister and Foreign Minister - [Yair Lapid](#) (Yesh Atid) (and Prime Minister in second half of term)
- Defense Minister - Benny Gantz (Blue and White)
- Finance Minister - Avigdor Liberman (Yisrael Beiteinu)
- Justice Minister - Gideon Saar (New Hope) (and Foreign Minister in second half of term)
- Education Minister - Yifat Sasha Biton (New Hope)
- Interior Minister - Ayelet Shaked (Yamina) (and Justice Minister in second half of term)
- Immigration Minister - Penina Tamano Shata (Blue and White)
- Internal Security Minister - Omer Bar Lev (Labor)
- Transportation Minister - Merav Michaeli (Labor)
- Health Minister - Nitzan Horwitz (Meretz)
- Environmental Minister - Tamar Zandberg (Meretz)
- Regional Cooperation Minister - Esawi Frej (Meretz)
- Welfare Minister - Meir Cohen (Yesh Atid)
- Energy Minister - Karine Elharar (Yesh Atid)
- Housing Minister - Zeev Elkin (New Hope)
- Diaspora Affairs Minister - Nachman Shai (Labor)
- Communications Minister - Yoaz Hendel (New Hope)
- Culture Minister - Chili Tropper (Blue and White)
- Knesset Speaker - Mickey Levi (Yesh Atid)

New President

In a quirk of timing, the Knesset also voted in Isaac (Bogie) Herzog, currently chair of the Jewish Agency for Israel, to be Israel's next President. Herzog, whose late father previously served in the same, largely ceremonial, position, will replace President Reuven (Ruvy) Rivlin, whose seven-year term ends next month.

As always, JFNA's Israel office is keeping a close watch on developments and will update Federations as needed.

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

Sources: The Knesset, Office of the Prime Minister, The Israel Democracy Institute, The Jerusalem Post, i24 News, Walla!, Kan Israel Radio, Galei Tzahal Radio, The Times of Israel, Ha'aretz