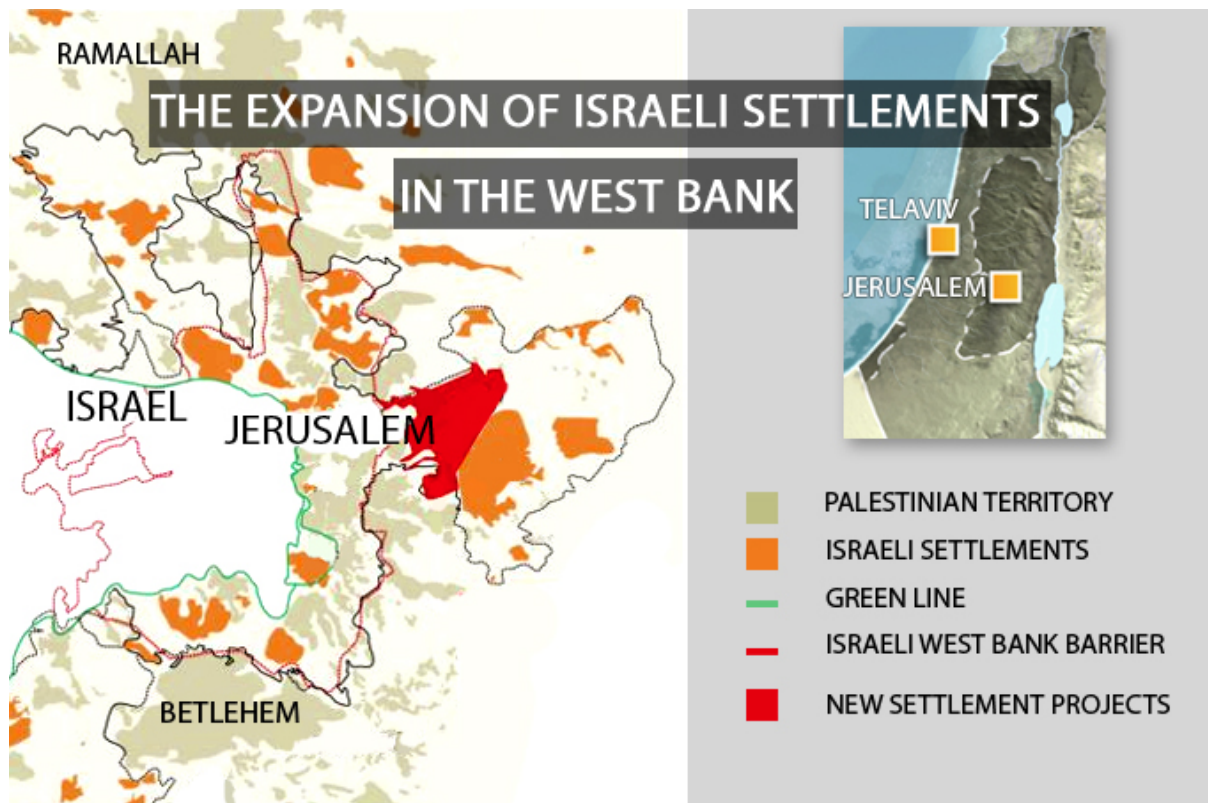


## Position Paper

# Israel's Increasingly Rightist Government





Formed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu with great difficulty, the new government is characterised by a political system that ensures its ability to adapt with changes in the domestic balance of forces by putting an end to polarisation based on ideology, ethnicity, socio-economic levels and personal conflict. Just a few months ago, Yair Lapid was merely a talk show host on Israeli television, and had been preoccupied with winning an annual poll in which he had been voted on numerous occasions as 'the most exciting man' among women. Today, he heads Yesh Atid, the second largest party in the new ruling coalition and serves as minister of finance, one of the most important of three major ministries in government even though it was the first time Yesh Atid ran for elections. Similarly, until a few months ago, forty-year-old Naftali Bennett ran a technology company. Today he heads the religious HaBayit HaYehudi ("The Jewish Home") party, the third largest force in the new government, and is the minister of economy and commerce, the second most important economic ministry in Israel.

The shifts in the balance of power, as seen in the new cabinet, is an indicator of further changes in the domestic balance of power, and will produce new frameworks for domestic policy. However, these changes do not at all guarantee a change in Israel's foreign policy. The composition of the new government in terms of parties and individuals represents a determination to resume the settlement and Judaisation policies and a refusal to respond to the conditions necessary for a political settlement for the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. There are also factors that portray that Israel will plunge deeper into settlement and Judaisation initiatives, become harsher in terms of its

relationship with Palestinians and Arabs in general, and is more willing to resort to force in dealing with Iran.

### **Polarisation within the Right Wing**

The Israeli political map suggests that the leadership of the state will remain within the right wing, between its secular and religious parties, for many years. However, the new government will see a clear shift in terms of the relationship between the components of the right wing. Since the political transition of 1977, when the rightwing became under the leadership of the Likud Party, secular rightwing parties and forces collaborated with religious parties and forces to ensure the continuation of the Likud party's rule. In the last decade, the religious sector was even able to penetrate right wing secular parties.

However, the formation of the new government symbolises a turning point in the relationship between the components of the Israeli right, the secular and religious camps, each of which seeks to employ its presence within the new government to boost its chances in the competition for the country's leadership. One of these camps is represented by Yesh Atid, a secular party from the 'centre-right,' which aspires to concretise a new camp that includes components of the secular right, including Likud, after it is liberated from the religious forces within it led by Moshe Feiglin and Ze'ev Elkin among others.

The other camp is led by HaBayit HaYehudi, which also aspires to lead Israel in future. It seeks to form a large alliance that includes a variety of religious parties. Bennett will be aided in his quest by the overwhelming discontent sweeping the ultra-Orthodox Haredi camp, especially Shas and Yahadut HaTorah HaMeukhedet ("United Torah Judaism") which are no longer part of the government. Except for a very short period, these two parties have been an integral part of the ruling coalition, which successively managed the affairs of Israel since 1977. Yesh Atid had insisted that these two parties not be recruited into the new government on the grounds that their followers do not perform military service. Thus, for the first time, Shas and Yahadut HaTorah will be absent from the circle of influence that had ensured the funding of their religious, educational and social institutions. Haredi parties also feel a great deal of anger towards HaBayit HaYehudi because it accepted their exclusion from government. However, the leaders of these parties are aware that due to the existing balance of power, they will have no choice but to cooperate with HaBayit HaYehudi in order to build a religious front to confront the secular trend.

It is apparent that, with the new polarisation, Netanyahu's opportunities to manoeuvre and ensure that he remains in control have decreased dramatically. This explains his desperate attempts to include Haredi and centre-left parties in the government; after all, they do not present themselves as substitutes for Netanyahu as head of government. He

was keen to exclude Lapid and Bennett from government because he realised that their parties would threaten his political future by employing their sources of influence in the government in order to improve their capability of competing for future leadership of the government. He also realised that they would aggravate polarisation within the right wing, potentially either disintegrating the Likud party or turning it into a marginal party, since it is currently built on the harmony between the secular and the religious right. Netanyahu understands that the new reality will push secular elites within Likud to join the secular camp that Lapid seeks to establish, while religious elites head towards the camp led by HaBayit HaYehudi.

Because of the new balance of power, the left wing parties – Labour and Meretz – are no longer taken into account. These two parties will remain on the margins of Israeli political life for a long time.

### **A Government of Settlements and Judaisation**

Despite their other differences, there is no dispute among the main components of the new government – Likud, Yesh Atid and HaBayit HaYehudi – that accelerating the pace of Jewish settlement in the West Bank and Jerusalem will be at the top of government's priorities. Yesh Atid (whose founding conference was held in the settlement of Ariel, the second largest Jewish settlement in the West Bank) defends the 'right' of settlers to build in the large settlement blocs just as it supports projects for the Judaisation of Jerusalem. However, HaBayit HaYehudi, whose leaders are mostly settlers, wants the government to increase the pace of construction even in remote settlements that are not annexed to the larger settlements.

HaBayit HaYehudi is keen on winning ministerial positions in ways that would enable it to impose its settlement-related agenda. Uri Ariel, vice president of the party and one of the most prominent settler leaders in the West Bank, will be minister of housing in the new government and, through this position, will control the issuance of government tenders for construction in settlements. Ariel rushed to dispel any doubts about plans in his new position. He made it clear that he believes that the West Bank (which he calls "Judea and Samaria") was an integral part of the 'Jewish national home Judea and Samaria and stressed his commitment to increase construction for Jews in all parts of the West Bank.

Furthermore, Bennett has been appointed minister of industry and commerce and will thus be able to determine what is known as areas of 'national priority.' These are areas that receive a greater share of government investments and whose residents enjoy substantial tax concessions. Bennett explained that he will be eager to establish industrial zones and other operational facilities near Jewish settlements to encourage Jews living in the centre and peripheries of Israel to move to the settlements. Any efforts



to strengthen Jewish settlement in the West Bank will receive the support of Likud ministers and parliamentarians, especially of those in Likud's religious forces led by Feiglin and Elkin.

### **The Prospects of a Third Intifada**

It is clear that the new Israeli government will reduce whatever political manoeuvrability of the Palestinian Authority (PA) may still have and push it to make difficult decisions. Despite intense pressures from the United States and the European Union, the PA cannot return to negotiations in light of continued settlements and Judaisation. PA president Mahmoud Abbas has publicly committed himself to refuse to resume negotiations unless Israel commits to halting settlements. This condition will not be accepted by the new Israeli government; and to complicate matters, the increase of settlements and Judaisation are associated with campaigns carried out by Jewish settlers who attack Palestinians in the West Bank and the PA remains unable to take any action whatsoever.

Furthermore, the PA is obliged to carry on its security cooperation with Israel. Both the United States and Israel are exerting great pressure on the PA for its failure to achieve national reconciliation to end internal division, which was explicitly recognised by Fatah leaders. Also, Abbas fears that terminating the security cooperation with Israel and leaning towards reconciliation with Hamas will lead the Americans and Europeans to cut aid to the PA, which will lead to further deterioration of economic conditions in the West Bank. It is possible that the hindrance of political prospects, the economic deterioration and the settlement expansion that confront the Palestinians will result in a mass reaction that may flare up as a third intifada which may dramatically reshuffle the cards for the Palestinians and shift relations with Israel.

### **Revival of the Doctrine of the "Sting of Arab Consciousness"**

Arguably, the greatest impact on the Israeli military's behaviour towards the Palestinians and Arabs will be the appointment of Moshe Ya'alon as minister of defence. Netanyahu has been besieged by right wing polarisation, and his two main partners in government are not from rich military backgrounds. Such a governmental environment will provide a suitable opportunity for Ya'alon to apply his military principles on how to deal with Arabs. Having once led the Sayeret Matkal military unit that is responsible for assassination operations in Arab countries and taken command of the intelligence division and the presidency of the general staff of the army, Ya'alon believes that the "sting of the collective Arab consciousness" can be suppressed through the use of force. According to a doctrine he explains in his 2008 book, *A Long Short Road*, force alone can convince Arabs to recognise Israel's existence in the region, and "what cannot be achieved by force will be achieved by greater force." It is thus widely expected that the new government will step up its military operations against the Palestinians under any pretexts. The application of this policy may be delayed by an aggravation of the situation

in Syria and the possibility that the prolongation of the Syrian crisis will effect Israeli security in one way or another.

### **Growing Support for Attacking Iran**

Israel is aware that any of its plans to confront the Iranian nuclear programme cannot overlook the implications of the international and regional environment, especially the position of the United States, on using armed force against the programme. Also, the ruling political elites are aware that there are differences within the military about the chances of success of a military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities and its long-term viability.

Despite this, according to his close affiliates, Netanyahu sees the elimination of the Iranian nuclear programme as the project of his life. He believes that allowing Iran to possess nuclear weapons entails the creation of a nuclear race that will enable Arab and Islamic nations to own these weapons. He is particularly concerned about Egypt and Turkey and believes the international community will be unable to question the legitimacy of their access to nuclear weapons if Iran possesses them. There is a clear majority within the new Israeli government that supports armed action against Iran if economic sanctions and the secret electronic war do not dissuade Iranian leadership from the further development of the nuclear programme.

Therefore, the new government will continue settlement construction and Judaisation and will be more willing to pull the trigger.

### **Expanding the Margins of Palestinian Manoeuvrability**

The policies of the new Israeli government will increase the challenges to the Palestinians the Arabs as a whole. This makes them in need of a multi-level Palestinian, Arab and international strategy for confronting Israel and reducing its manoeuvrability. They can work towards the elimination of international legitimacy for the new government. In this respect, there are elements that can be built upon after the recognition of Palestine as an 'observer' state at the United Nations. It is highly unlikely that the majority of countries in the world will agree to the new Israeli government's implementation of a programme based on the expansion of settlements and the Judaisation of the Palestinian state's territory, which has been internationally recognised. Certainly, this calls for the Arabs' clarification to the White House that it is not in their or the United States' interest to accept the unprecedented political cover – which gave the Israeli government an open mandate to do whatever it pleases – granted by President Obama during his recent visit. Palestinian President Abbas should employ all his cards from Palestine's membership in the United Nations, particularly the filing of urgent lawsuits against Israel before the International Criminal Court because of the ongoing projects of settlements and Judaisation, and the massacres perpetrated against

Palestinians in the Gaza Strip during the 2008 and 2011 wars. There is no doubt that one of the trump cards the Palestinians possess in the face of the new Israeli government is achieving national reconciliation and consensus on a comprehensive national programme that includes all active Palestinian forces in order to reduce the ability of Israel and others to use Palestinian fragmentation for the achievement of further interests.

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