

After four elections and prolonged deadlock, Israel has a new coalition government, made up of eight highly diverse parties: there are representatives of the left, right, and centre; secular and religious; Jew and Muslim; capitalist and socialist; parties favouring a two-state solution and opposed to settlement activity co-exist with others who are pro-annexation and fiercely opposed to a Palestinian state. There's something for everyone, even Israeli Arabs and Bedouin.

Because of the system of absolute proportional representation, Israel is always governed by coalition. Even so, this one has some unusual features:

- Naftali Bennett, who will rotate with Yair Lapid, is the first Prime Minister in Israel's history to be an observant (i.e., Orthodox) Jew;
- he represents a tiny party, with only 6 seats in the 120 member Knesset (5% of the vote);
- the ultra-Orthodox parties have been excluded from the Coalition (an objective of both Bennett and Lapid: Avigdor Lieberman is also strongly opposed to special privileges for the Haredim);
- for the first time the coalition includes an Arab party, the conservative, Islamist Ra'am Party. Hitherto the conventional wisdom has been that it was unthinkable that a Zionist party should depend for its parliamentary majority on Israeli Arabs.

Programme

Not surprisingly, given the clashing views within the Coalition on issues connected to the Palestinian issue – on which at least two of the parties are further to the right than former Prime Minister Benjamin “Bibi” Netanyahu – the emphasis of the written coalition agreement is heavily skewed towards domestic issues, focusing on improvements in healthcare, infrastructure, education and a reduction in poverty. Quite a few measures will benefit the Israeli Arab component of the population. The agreement includes such bread-and-butter items as the following:

- construction of new hospitals in the Negev and Galilee;
- establishment of an additional airport;
- establishment of a university in the Galilee;
- plans for the strengthening and development of northern Israel;
- more in the health budget for additional medicines, equipment and medical technologies;
- help for the hotel and tourism industry in response to the Covid crisis, in the form of tax relief, flexible furlough and compensation for new businesses;
- a programme to eradicate crime in the Arab sector (a serious and shamefully neglected problem);
- increasing income support for the elderly to 70% of the minimum wage;
- the installation of fibre optic cable in the periphery and the Arab sector;
- an increase in affordable housing, adding 300,000 units to the market;
- establishing a model of unemployment benefits for the self-employed;
- working to reduce regulation, remove bureaucratic barriers and promote digitisation of government services (“zero paper, zero queues”);
- setting a national goal for raising the number of high-tech workers to 15% of all workers in the economy by 2026.

The status quo on religious matters – always a tricky issue in Israel – will largely be maintained, but the government programme does provide for, among other things:

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- creating competition in the (lucrative) field of Kashrut services, as well as promoting standardisation;
- changing the body that elects the Chief Rabbi of Israel so as to bring about the election of a Zionist Chief Rabbi.

Other important domestic elements include:

- splitting the positions of Attorney General and State Prosecutor;
- limiting the term of office of any Prime Minister to two terms or eight years (Netanyahu was Prime Minister for 12 unbroken years);
- ensuring Israel's interests in Area C (the area of the West Bank still under Israeli control), with additional funds to the Ministry of Defence to deal with construction violations and the illegal takeover of land. This implies a further crackdown on West Bank Palestinians: it's a Bennett proposal and a surprise that the Left allowed its inclusion;
- legislation of a Recruitment Law for military service (a fresh attempt to remove or limit the much-resented exemptions accorded to the many ultra-Orthodox yeshiva students);
- promoting increased Jewish immigration to the State of Israel.

Very little, therefore, on the Palestinian issue, beyond the unwelcome reference to Area C. It's not hard to understand why. Try to move towards renewed negotiations on a two-state solution based on 1967 borders with mutually agreed adjustments, as mandated by numerous UN Security Council resolutions (and supported, at least rhetorically, by the Biden Administration), and the Coalition would immediately collapse from the Right, led by the Prime Minister himself. Attempts at a blanket ban all new settlement activity would produce the same result. Try to annex all or part of Area C and the Coalition would collapse from the Left. The same probably applies to a move to approve major new settlement growth, though Bennett does need some new settlement activity to stave off the accusations from the Right of betrayal.

In either case, it's important to bear in mind that the Coalition enjoys only a wafer thin 61/59 majority in the Knesset, and that Bibi Netanyahu will be doing everything in his power to attract votes away from it. His Likud remains the largest single party in the Knesset, and he's the most experienced, devious and ruthless politician in Israel.

There are two major foreign policy issues on which the Coalition will find consensus: Iran, and relations with the United States. Like Netanyahu, the main Coalition parties are strongly opposed to the efforts of the Biden Administration to revive the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action). Their concerns appear to be not just the nuclear weapons aspects of the Plan but also Iran's ballistic missiles capability and disruptive behaviour elsewhere in the Middle East, e.g., Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Iranian support of organisations such as Hamas.

However, unlike Netanyahu's strident public attacks on Biden over the JCPOA, and his attempts to stir up public opinion in the US, by far Israel's most important source of support, the Coalition have made clear that they will pursue their aims through quiet dialogue as befits allies rather than through megaphone diplomacy. This is in keeping with their wider policy of bringing relations with the Biden Administration back on to an even keel. Before Netanyahu, Israeli governments had always had a policy of maintaining good relations with both Democrat and Republican parties and administrations. However, Netanyahu, who had earlier had a difficult relationship with President Obama, abandoned the bipartisan policy and threw his lot in with Trump. In effect, it meant relying on the Evangelical vote and the Orthodox Jewish community.

Initial contacts have gone well. The Biden Administration have no interest in pushing the Israel/Palestine issue. With so many pressing domestic concerns to pursue, the JCPOA to

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revive and withdrawal from Afghanistan to manage, negotiations for a two-state solution are simply not an early priority.

The Odd Couple

How durable is this very odd coalition of opposites? On average Israeli governments have a life expectancy of a little under two years. It's early days and a lot is uncertain. However, there are three factors that militate against early instability:

- dislike of Netanyahu is the most important cement holding the Coalition together. None of the main players, most of whom were at some stage in various Netanyahu governments, trusts Netanyahu. His unscrupulous and manipulative behaviour, and discarding of allies as soon as they ceased to be useful, has profoundly alienated them. It's personal. As the saying goes, 'what goes around comes around';
- personal relations between Bennett and Yair Lapid are good. The two men made an agreement as long ago as 2013 that neither would join a coalition under Netanyahu without the other, and the pact has held. There is trust between them, and Lapid is confident that Bennett will honour the rotation agreement and hand over the Premiership when the time comes in 2023. No one forgets that Netanyahu's most recent betrayal was of a similar agreement he had with Benny Ganz, on which he ratted at the first opportunity;
- Israel does not want or need a fifth election. Four is more than enough. The electorate are exhausted. The inertia factor should not be underestimated.

Meanwhile, Netanyahu lurks in the wings. Politics in Israel is a down and dirty, brass knuckles business. But even by Israeli standards Netanyahu's final speech in the Knesset as Prime Minister violated every norm. Instead of supporting his successor in facing the many challenges ahead, Netanyahu went public again on his disagreements with the Biden Administration, and dismissed Bennett (his former Chief of Staff) as a weakling who would cave in to the US over the JCPOA. "Bennett does not have the international standing, he doesn't have the credibility, he doesn't have the capabilities, he doesn't have the knowledge and he doesn't have the governmental support to allow him a real defense. The Prime Minister of Israel needs to be able to say no to the president of the United States on matters that threaten our existence.' Classy.

Netanyahu will continue to snipe away at Bennett in the months ahead as his own trial on charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust continues, in the hope of bringing down the Coalition. But Bennett would have difficulties enough without such harassment. He may get on well with Lapid, but the other two right wing party leaders in the Coalition (Messrs Liberman and Saar) hold him in very low esteem. Moreover, the Prime Minister can only fire members of his own party from the Cabinet, and he can only act with the agreement of the Alternate Prime Minister. This is not a formula for decisive government.

The new government face several immediate tricky challenges:

- first and foremost, the ceasefire in Gaza is fragile. Indirect contacts are underway for a long-term truce (hudna in Arabic), in return for which the Israelis would ease the economic blockade and allow reconstruction to begin. Two problems here: the Israelis are seeking to link the issue of reconstruction with the release of two Israeli citizens held by Hamas (apparently both have mental issues and entered Gaza voluntarily) and the return of the bodies of two soldiers killed in the 2014 operation. Whereas Hamas, still flushed with their Pyrrhic 'victory', are not only refusing to accept linkage but making continued peace and quiet to Israeli good behaviour in and around Jerusalem. Yahya Sinwar, the leader of Hamas in the Gaza Strip (who acquired fluent Hebrew during long years in an Israeli prison) has said he's not sure that Israel has 'learned the lesson' of the last round;

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- on past precedent the issue would be solved by an exchange of prisoners, but currently there is deadlock. Pending a resolution, Israel has allowed the import into Gaza of fuel for the power station, supplied by Qatar. This will allow the resumption of such essential services as wastewater treatment and healthcare (e.g., CT scans and MRI's). The limit on Gazan fishermen has also been extended from 6 to 9 miles;
- a linked concern is maintenance of the credibility of the Israeli deterrent. Hamas floated some incendiary balloons across the fence with Israel on 15 June. The IDF replied with robust airstrikes against Hamas sites the following day and this produced a lull for the next two weeks. But Hamas has renewed the use of balloons, perhaps to test the limits. It remains something of a grumbling appendix. The potential for miscalculation and escalation is obvious;
- Netanyahu has left a couple of poison pill issues for the Coalition. One concerns a longstanding illegal Jewish outpost in Area C. The IDF want it abandoned on security grounds: it's too exposed and too much trouble to defend. Lapid wants it evacuated on legal grounds (the Palestinians claim to have sound legal title to the property and have taken the issue to court). The left wing parties in the Coalition want it abandoned because they oppose further settlement. The right wing parties want a weasel wording solution whereby the outpost is evacuated, the houses are not demolished, the land concerned is turned into State land, the settlers return and a new yeshiva is built there. Quite a predicament for the Prime Minister, who is firmly in the settler camp, and a test for a Coalition of highly divergent component parts that nevertheless needs to find a way to work together.

All in all a lot of uncertainty ahead. Plenty of potential pitfalls. However, even though 72% of Israelis voted for right wing parties there does seem to be a surprising degree of agreement in the Coalition on one point: goodbye Bibi Netanyahu.



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Sir Kieran Prendergast KCVO, CMG led a distinguished career in the British Foreign Office and at the United Nations, serving as British Ambassador to Turkey and High Commissioner to Zimbabwe and Kenya. At the UN, Sir Kieran served as the Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs. Sir Kieran remains active in the field of conflict management and resolution through his role at the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue.