

Netanyahu for the sixth time: the new Israeli government

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A new Israeli government was sworn in on 29 December 2022, as Benjamin Netanyahu took the helm as prime minister for the sixth time in his career, after a year and a half in opposition. Negotiations on forming a government coalition had been ongoing since early November, when parliamentary elections were held for the fifth time in four years. The new coalition holds 64 of the 120 seats in the Knesset, and consists of six parties: two are ultra-religious, three combine religious and national radicalism, while the largest of them, Likud, is a secular nationalist party.

The make-up of the coalition, the views of individual members of the government and its first moves indicate that the new cabinet is Israel's most religiously conservative and nationalist in its history. We should expect its policies to institute significant changes in many areas of public life. This applies primarily to domestic affairs, but also to some extent to Israel's relations with the US and Russia, as well as the war in Ukraine.

The formation of the government does not solve the problem of political instability in Israel, which is largely systemic. However, it appears that the newly-appointed cabinet will continue to operate at least until Netanyahu succeeds in using it to remove the threat of the ongoing corruption trials against him.

The political context of the government's formation

The early parliamentary elections of November 2022 took place against the backdrop of almost four years of political deadlock. Since 2019, four consecutive elections yielded inconclusive results, and the two cabinets formed during that period proved to be short-lived political experiments. Although the sympathies of the Israeli electorate remained largely unchanged, the tactical successes which one side achieved during the campaign combined with the mistakes of the other resulted in a clear mandate for a distinct political option, namely the national and religious right. The result was a triumph for Netanyahu, who regained power despite the shadow of the criminal trials hanging over him and the fact that his capacity to form coalitions – which had previously been almost unlimited – was narrowed down to the extreme right of the Israeli political spectrum, due to the charges levelled against him.

Netanyahu's comeback, however, was mainly made possible by the success of Religious Zionism, an electoral coalition of three extreme religious-nationalist factions. The leaders of this bloc include Itamar Ben-Gvir, the new security minister, who has been convicted in the past for inciting hatred



against Arabs and supporting Jewish terrorism, and Bezalel Smotrich, the new finance minister, who is a proponent of radical expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and calls himself a “proud homophobe”.

Although Netanyahu himself engineered the formation of this bloc as he sought a pre-election consolidation of the right wing, he will find these partners inconvenient, so it cannot be ruled out that he may try to replace these coalition partners at a later stage. For this to happen, however, it will be necessary to avert the threat of criminal trials (for example by decriminalising the acts he is accused of) and to weaken the constitutional position of the Israeli Supreme Court, something that only his current partners can help him with.

The new government consists of more than 30 ministers, but in practice the most important decisions (especially with regard to foreign policy) will probably be taken by Netanyahu and his closest aides without consulting the coalition partners, or even in full disregard of formal bodies or procedures, as was the case in the past. On the other hand, the prime minister will be quite limited in his ability to discipline his partners and enforce obedience within his own party, which includes a cluster of disgruntled members.

” The new government will last at least until Netanyahu, with the help of his coalition partners, succeeds in defusing the threat of the criminal trials hanging over him, and in weakening the position of the Supreme Court.

Therefore, Netanyahu will have to manage the coalition in such a way as not to jeopardise its durability and efficiency, while also minimising the consequences for both domestic and foreign policy of the presence of extremist forces in his cabinet. As a result, a kind of ‘division of labour’ should be expected: very radical rhetoric and confrontational (mainly anti-Arab) actions by some coalition ministers – whether coordinated with the prime minister or not – accompanied by Netanyahu’s more temperate remarks, intended to emphasise that only what he says and does actually matters. Despite this, the likelihood of minor or major government crises is high. The first major test for the new cabinet will be to draft the budget, which must be adopted by the end of May.

Policy on the home front and the occupied territories

The new government is made up of the most conservative and nationalistic forces on the Israeli political scene, which has tilted very clearly to the right.¹ It has taken power by brandishing identity-religious, national and anti-liberal slogans. In practice, its most significant policies include (1) striving to weaken the constitutional role of the Supreme Court, (2) undermining Palestinian aspirations to statehood and pledging to step up settlement activity in the occupied territories, and (3) consolidating the autonomy of the ultra-Orthodox community.

The powerful position of the Supreme Court, which involves the judicial review of legislation passed by the Knesset for its compliance with the ‘Basic Laws’ (a quasi-constitution), has long been a thorn in the side of the Israeli right. In the view of the parties that make up the government, the Supreme Court interferes with the sovereignty of the legislative power; it has no constitutional basis, and is thus also ‘anti-democratic’. From their point of view, many of the Supreme Court’s rulings based on liberal provisions in the Basic Laws represent an effort to impose on society the values it has consistently rejected, having voted overwhelmingly for the national and religious right for years.

¹ The right wing of various shades includes 75 of the 120 Knesset deputies who were elected in the elections held on 1 November 2022.

In the new government's rhetoric, it is the Supreme Court's judicial activism that stands in the way of solving pressing problems such as high property prices, illegal immigration from Africa and the threat from 'disloyal' Arab citizens. As a response, the government has already announced a package of reforms that includes allowing the Knesset to override a Supreme Court veto with an absolute majority, and increasing the influence of the executive on the composition of the Judicial Selection Committee.

With regard to the Palestinians and the occupied territories, the government's policy statement says that "the Jewish people have an exclusive and inalienable right

to all parts of the land of Israel" (that is, all the territories between the River Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea). This openly challenges the so-called two-state formula supported by the US and the EU, which implies the possible creation of a Palestinian state. This statement has been accompanied by a pledge to expand Jewish settlements both inside Israel's borders in regions with large Arab populations) and in the occupied territories (the Golan Heights and the West Bank, called 'Judea and Samaria' in Israeli terminology).

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The new cabinet also intends to increase funding for religious schools and social benefits for the ultra-Orthodox community (13% of the population) and, at a later stage, to legally regulate the exemption of ultra-Orthodox men from military service.

An issue outside the scope of official government policy, but one where tensions can be expected, is the situation around the Temple Mount/al-Aqsa Mosque complex in Jerusalem. In vastly oversimplified terms, the so-called status quo, or the informal arrangement between the Israeli authorities and the Muslim side that has governed the status of the site since the occupation of East Jerusalem by Israeli troops in 1967, implies that it is a Muslim place of worship and that Jews are granted limited access: they can visit it, but should not pray there.

This state of affairs has been consistently challenged by the forces currently represented in the Israeli government as 'religious discrimination against Jews in their own state' (Israel considers East Jerusalem to be part of its territory).² Although this issue has never been a priority for Netanyahu himself, but rather a problem, the composition of his coalition means that we should expect to see members of the Israeli government provoking crises around the Temple Mount/al-Aqsa Mosque complex.³

The new government's foreign policy

The priorities and strategic directions of Israel's foreign policy are constant and independent of government changes. They primarily include maintaining the best (yet most sovereign) possible relations with the United States, the neutralisation of the Iranian threat, and the development of friendly political, economic and military relations with the countries of the Middle East. At the same time, however, we should expect far-reaching changes in the way policy is conducted compared to the course taken by the previous government of Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid.

In relations with the US, previous Israeli leaders consistently sought to soft-pedal their differences, and focused on behind-the-scenes efforts to influence Washington's policies. To some degree they were also open to US expectations on global policy issues. In the context of Iran this meant that,

² 'Ben Gvir: I will fight against racism so that Jews can enter the Temple Mount', Israel National News – Arutz Sheva, 4 January 2023, israelnationalnews.com.

³ C. Parker, 'What is the Temple Mount, and why did Itamar Ben Gvir's visit stoke tension?', The Washington Post, 5 January 2023, [washingtonpost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com).

despite concerns over US efforts to rejoin the nuclear agreement with Tehran, the Bennett-Lapid government chose not to openly confront the US on the issue, and focused on lobbying to secure the most desirable shape of a possible 'deal'.

Israel also sought to avoid clashes with Washington over its settlement activity in the West Bank, so the expansion of settlements was scaled back (though not completely halted). In turn, its openness to US expectations was demonstrated by the limited development of relations with China, as well as its attitude towards the war in Ukraine.

The Bennett-Lapid government did not see the Russian aggression as an issue directly affecting Israel's vital national interests and did not want to inflame relations with Russia (not least because of its military presence in Syria); hence it did not join the sanctions or provide military aid to Ukraine. It did, however, condemn the invasion and war crimes, and also its froze high-level contacts with Moscow.

Netanyahu is likely to make many changes in Israel's foreign policy. His government has been on a collision course with the US Democratic administration from the very

” The new government's agenda stands in stark contrast to the values espoused by the Democratic administration in the US, something which will put the two countries on a collision course.

beginning. Its denial of the Palestinians' right to their own state, pledges to step up settlement activity, plans to limit the role of the Supreme Court and opposition to the demands of the LGBT movement (in response to a minority that is nonetheless a vocal part of the coalition forces) stand in stark contrast to the values espoused by Joe Biden's administration, and will have a negative impact on relations between the two countries.

The Israeli government's first statements (especially on Palestine) have already received a diplomatic but unequivocal rebuke from Washington.⁴ However, given the scale of the global challenges facing the United States and the fact that relations with Israel are part of both foreign and domestic US policy, it is difficult to predict to what extent the White House will be willing to openly confront Israel.⁵ After all, the dispute could spill over into US domestic politics.

On the issue of the Iranian nuclear and conventional threats, Netanyahu has consistently opposed any kind of negotiations with that country, and has stressed the need for sustained pressure on international (especially US) public opinion to isolate and weaken Tehran as much as possible.

In view of the above, we should expect the Israeli prime minister to mount a diplomatic offensive aimed at mobilising US political and military resources against Iran.⁶ Netanyahu's past actions (*vide* his 2015 speech to Congress targeting President Barack Obama) suggest that he may seek to exploit political tensions in the US to this end.

On the war in Ukraine, Netanyahu has so far shied away from taking a stand. However, his rare statements suggest that not only does he not view Russian aggression as a pressing problem for Israel, but actually sees it as an issue that is distracting the world from what in his point of view is most important – the Iranian threat. He has also criticised the previous government for being too unequivocal on the war, even though this stance was mainly expressed in political statements.

⁴ Statement from President Joe Biden on the New Government of the State of Israel, [The White House](https://www.whitehouse.gov), 29 December 2022, [whitehouse.gov](https://www.whitehouse.gov).

⁵ A.D. Miller, 'Don't expect Biden to confront Netanyahu anytime soon', [CNN](https://www.cnn.com), 4 January 2023, edition.cnn.com.

⁶ 'Netanyahu to AIPAC: It's time to 'close ranks' between Israel and the US on Iran', [The Times of Israel](https://www.timesofisrael.com), 9 January 2023, [timesofisrael.com](https://www.timesofisrael.com).

Therefore, we should expect his cabinet to be even more reluctant to join Western actions against Russia. This attitude was confirmed by the first speech of the new foreign minister Eli Cohen⁷ and his telephone conversation with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov.⁸ It is not out of the question that Israel will take steps in support of Ukraine; however it appears that these will primarily be transactional in nature, as part of the country's relationship with the US.

It remains an open question how Moscow's deepening military co-operation with Tehran will affect the Israeli government's attitude

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towards the war. However, after taking into account Netanyahu's evident desire to thaw relations with Russia, his long history of close ties with Vladimir Putin, his extreme political pragmatism, his tendency to deal directly with the “great leaders of this world”, and finally, Israel's growing attractiveness as a partner from Moscow's perspective, it appears likely that behind-the-scenes contacts between the government in Jerusalem and the Russian side will intensify, so as to limit the damage to the Jewish state resulting from Russian-Iranian cooperation.

Another clear foreign policy priority for the new government will be to pursue the normalisation of relations with more Arab states, above all with Saudi Arabia, under a process that was initiated by Netanyahu and continued by his successors.

Relations with the European Union are likely to be fundamentally different than under the previous government. The Bennett-Lapid cabinet sought to unfreeze relations with the EU and fostered relations with the bloc's largest countries, notably France and Germany. This bore fruit in October 2022 when the EU-Israel Association Council convened for the first time after a ten-year hiatus. For Netanyahu, relations with the EU have never been a priority, and the religious-nationalist orientation of his government sets him on a collision course with the EU. It therefore appears likely that institutional relations will be frozen once again, and that Israel will return to bilateral dealings with the most pro-Israeli of the EU's member states.

On the personal level, Netanyahu himself will primarily be responsible for foreign policy. Strategic affairs minister Ron Dermer (ambassador to the US in 2013–21)⁹ and national security adviser Tzachi Hanegbi will also be key figures. In contrast, the foreign ministry, now headed by Eli Cohen (who will be swapped for Yisrael Katz after a year), will be less important, as was the case during Netanyahu's previous terms as prime minister.

Summary

The outcome of the 1 November elections and the resulting composition of the new government coalition can be seen as the culmination of more than two decades of Israel's political evolution towards a national and religious orientation. Although those who identify as secular make up the largest group in Israeli society (c. 40%), the last two decades saw the religious and national-religious parties gaining an ever stronger position on the political stage. Similarly, although some 34% of the public have declared their support for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and

⁷ D.I. Klein, 'In first speech, Israel's new foreign minister signals a closer relationship with Russia', Jewish Telegraphic Agency, 3 January 2023, [jta.org](https://www.jta.org).

⁸ 'Russia's Lavrov congratulates new Israeli FM Cohen in phone call that may anger Kyiv', The Times of Israel, 3 January 2023, [timesofisrael.com](https://www.timesofisrael.com).

⁹ 'Ron Dermer Lays Out Priorities, Including Ensuring that 'Evil Regime in Tehran' Can't Destroy Israel', The Algemeiner, 12 January 2023, [algemeiner.com](https://www.algemeiner.com).

some 41% would like to see the *status quo* maintained,¹⁰ in practice, power for most of this period has been in the hands of forces that have been consistently shifting the balance to the advantage of the Jewish side while supporting, or at least enabling, the expansion of West Bank settlements, at a faster or slower pace.

The agenda of religious conservatism and national radicalism is not supported by the majority of Israeli society, but there is no clear counterbalance to this agenda in either a strictly party political sense or, above all, in terms of ideas and language, especially when a significant part of the factions opposed to Netanyahu also represent different shades of nationalism.

The ongoing national and religious radicalisation of Netanyahu's successive governments has to some extent galvanised the opposition around calls to remove him from power, preserve the secular nature of the state and, especially now, defend the independence of the Supreme Court. However, after taking into account the opposition's extremely diverse nature (ranging from the nationalist right to Arab parties) and the recent failed experiment with joint rule, it is unclear whether it will be able to offer any coherent and politically viable vision. So far it has fallen short, and the latest election has propelled the most conservative and most nationalist of any possible political configurations into power. The mass protests against the announced judicial reforms, which have so far mainly taken place in Tel Aviv, are also unlikely to reach a scale that could have a significant impact on government policy, even if they have occurred frequently and attracted media attention.

On the issue of the state's attitude to religion, the new cabinet can be expected to consolidate the influence of Orthodox Judaism in the life of Israeli society as a whole, and also to effectively entrench the organisational, financial and (in selected areas) legal autonomy of the ultra-Orthodox population.

If the new government follows through on its pledges with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the evolution towards a *de facto* one-state solution is likely to accelerate. As a result, only one state would ultimately exist between the River Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea, exercising authority over groups with different statuses and radically different packages of rights.

In the area of international relations and security, the Iranian threat will be an absolute priority for the Netanyahu government, and by extension its policy towards other actors, including the US, Russia and the Arab states, will largely be subordinated to this challenge. Its efforts to put the Iran problem in the spotlight of the international community will be accompanied by signals that Israel is prepared to take unilateral action on this issue.¹¹

Finally, it should be noted that due to its course in both domestic and foreign policy, Israel under Netanyahu will inevitably generate political tensions that will absorb the attention of both the US and the EU.

¹⁰ T. Hermann, O. Anabi, 'What Solutions to the Conflict with the Palestinians are Acceptable to Israelis?', The Israel Democracy Institute, 3 August 2021, en.idi.org.il.

¹¹ A. Bernard, 'Whatever It Takes': Israeli Defense Chief Presses US on Iran Threat', The Algemeiner, 4 January 2023, [algemeiner.com](https://www.algemeiner.com).