

Israel's New Government; Initial Commentary by Experts of the Mitvim Institute

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Israel's 36th government was sworn in on June 13, 2021 under the shared leadership of Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid, marking the first time in 12 years that an Israeli government is not headed by Benjamin Netanyahu. It is also the first time in years that most top foreign policy positions (including the Foreign Minister and Chair of the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee) are held by representatives of the political center and left.

The experts of the Mitvim Institute shed light on the implications of the new government for Israeli foreign policy. Dr. Gil Murciano describes the "government of change" as a "government of rehabilitation" and urges it to sever alliances Netanyahu forged with illiberal governments; Dr. Nimrod Goren outlines the broad agreement on foreign policy issues among the diverse coalition parties enabling them to set aside ideological differences; Merav Kahana-Dagan welcomes the increased representation of women in strategic spaces; Dr. Lior Lehrs describes the gaps between Bennett's "conflict reduction" approach and ongoing unilateral Israeli moves, suggesting a potential clash in the future both within the coalition and between Bennett and the Biden Administration; Dr. Roei Kibrik believes that despite the constraints of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the new government still has significant foreign policy maneuverability; Dr. Maya Sion-Tzidkiyahu sees Netanyahu's downfall as an opportunity for renewed top-level dialogue with the European Union if the government adopts a new tone on the peace process; Sana Knaneh describes the new coalition as representing the spectrum of Israel's many tribes but wonders whether numerical representation promises equal partnership in terms of influence; Nadav Tamir identifies an opportunity to turn the page on relations with the US administration; and former Knesset member Ksenia Svetlova calls for re-prioritizing Israel's relations with Jordan given their current nadir.

Rehabilitating Foreign Policy: An Overarching Goal of the New Government

**Dr. Gil Murciano
CEO of the Mitvim Institute**

The overarching goal of the new government is rehabilitation – especially of Israel's foreign relations with countries key to its future and prosperity. While ideologically polarized, the new coalition is based on broad consensus, and therefore its implementation of significant policy measures is likely to be curtailed. On the other hand, the government is no longer bound by Benjamin Netanyahu's system of alliances and his personal issues. We tend to overlook the importance of Netanyahu's decision to brand Israel as a member of the illiberal democratic axis. The Netanyahu-Trump-Bolsonaro-Orban connection may have yielded short-term dividends, but it created ideological friction with the US Democratic Party and liberal Western states. Rehabilitating relations with them begins with rebuilding mutual trust and highlighting

shared values. Netanyahu's ousting also lifts limitations in the regional arena – although he signed the Abraham Accords, his government's policies greatly limited Israel's ability to translate them into regional integration breakthroughs. The government's first order of business is to rebuild the vital relationship with Jordan that reached rock-bottom under Netanyahu. Rehabilitation also means civil service integrity and sound governance in the field of foreign policy. "A sane government", as Lapid described it, is a government that conducts foreign policy in a rational manner rather than using it to bolster its political base or reward associates.

Despite Ideological Differences, Coalition Partners Should Agree on Urgent Foreign Policy Goals

Dr. Nimrod Goren
President of the Mitvim Institute

The new government offers the opportunity for significant improvements in Israeli foreign policy, despite the popular belief that this government will be ineffective in this domain due to ideological differences among its member parties. Indeed, dramatic moves vis-à-vis the Palestinians, such as evacuating settlements or annexing territory, are not expected to occur, but this is not the total sum of Israeli diplomacy. The weakening of Israel's Foreign Service under Netanyahu, flawed policy directions taken, and regional potential that was left untapped – all provide fertile ground for agreed actions the government could take despite its diversity. There is every reason to believe that the left, center and right coalition parties can reach agreement on a series of urgent foreign policy goals: rebuilding trust with the Jordanian monarchy and restoring Israel's strategically important ties with the Kingdom; deepening ties with the US Democratic Party to restore bipartisan support for Israel; leveraging the normalization agreements with Arab states to forge bilateral and regional cooperation; improving relations with the European Union and renewing the high-level dialogue (Association Council) which has not convened since 2012; leveraging opportunities for Israel in the Eastern Mediterranean, including restoring relations with Turkey to the ambassadorial level and advancing maritime border negotiations with Lebanon; and strengthening the moderate Palestinian leadership at the expense of Hamas, while restoring Israeli-Palestinian dialogue channels to advance mutual interests.

The Change Government sets a Higher Standard of Gender Parity

Merav Kahana-Dagan
Deputy CEO, Mitvim Institute

Israel's 36th government, the "change government", is not only diverse in terms of political ideology, but also gender representation. Nine of its ministers, about one-third, are women; six Knesset committee chairs are women, three women are members of the security cabinet; one is a deputy Knesset speaker and one is the deputy coalition whip (for only the second time in Israel's history). The new government has set a record in terms of women ministers and appointed an impressive number of women to key Knesset and government posts, with an emphasis on top-level foreign affairs and security positions. Unfortunately, even in Israel in 2021, this amount of gender representation in government is not the norm. Despite the (allegedly) positive approach to UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which mandates women's representation in policymaking on security and peace issues, and Israeli law

requiring “adequate representation” of women in decision-making spaces, women are largely absent from such positions. Just this past year, we have seen women in Israel being pushed to the sidelines and excluded from significant decision making centers, such as the coronavirus cabinet. Hopefully, the new government will work to correct such injustices, which not only undermine gender equality but also Israel's national security. Women must play an active and significant role in every strategic decision-making forum. The government's initial appointments are an excellent start in this regard. Now, the new government must continue to implement Article 30 of its own guidelines: “The government will work towards the full social equality of men and women”.

The New Government will Seek “Conflict Reduction”, but Can it Avoid a Clash with the US Administration?

Dr. Lior Lehms

Director of the Program on Israeli-Palestinian Peacemaking, Mitvim Institute

Israel's new government is widely expected to avoid significant measures on the Palestinian issue. Coalition representatives have stressed that while Israel will not annex territory, it also will not agree to establishment of a Palestinian state. If this assumption is correct, what policy can be expected within these parameters? Bennett provided a hint in his first Knesset speech as prime minister, when he declared that “security calm will lead to economic steps, which will lead to reducing friction and the conflict”. These remarks differ from his 2012 plan to annex Area C, but his intentions are hard to assess and his remarks are reminiscent of Netanyahu's proposed “economic peace”. Fortunately for Bennett, unlike previous Israeli leaders he will not be facing immediate American pressure to resume permanent status talks with the Palestinians. However, a clash with Washington and other international actors over unilateral Israeli moves on the ground is almost inevitable. Bennett already outlined the areas of disagreement with the US when he announced plans to “strengthen the settlement movement” and “ensure the national interest in Area C” (an oblique reference to planned razing of Palestinian construction). The Biden Administration is expected to mount harsh opposition to such moves. Even if Jerusalem and Washington try to avoid confrontation on the Palestinian issue in the near future, dynamic and controversial developments such as the eviction of Palestinian families from Sheikh Jarrah, the evacuation of the Evyatar outpost and the “flag parade” in Jerusalem could generate clashes sooner than expected. Hopefully, the peace camp representatives in the new government will head off such efforts by their right-wing government colleagues and instead advance a positive direction in the Palestinian arena, such as forming dialogue channels with their Palestinian government counterparts.

Despite the Constraints of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, the New Government has Significant Potential for Action on Foreign Relations

Dr. Roe Kibrik

Research Director, Mitvim Institute

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has a decisive impact on Israel's foreign relations. This is the very issue that delineates the new government's joint space for maneuvering. Within these limited parameters of consensus, nonetheless, there are several foreign policy issues that the new government can act on in concert, continuing the positive efforts of the previous government and changing where it failed. The new government can and must continue to

strengthen cooperation with Israel's Middle Eastern and Mediterranean Basin neighbors, and continue to rehabilitate and strengthen ties with Europe started by former FM Ashkenazi. It can and must change its direction via its relations with the US, restoring bipartisan support for Israel and relations with the American progressive Jewish community. The new government should change direction and move away from populist, racist and anti-Semitic leaders embraced by the previous prime minister. Furthermore, the government must increase its effort to integrate Israel in international organizations and initiatives, certainly in confronting the climate crisis, but also in the fields of economics, foreign aid, health, research, gender equality, and more. These issues are all within the scope of the government's emerging consensus, and they offer an opportunity for the citizens and residents of Israel.

Opportunity for Bennett and Lapid to upgrade Israel-EU Relations after Decade-Long Standstill

Dr. Maya Sion-Tzidkiyahu

Director of the Israel-Europe Relations Program, Mitvim Institute

Many EU member states long awaited Netanyahu's fall. Under the Netanyahu governments of the past decade, Israel's relations with the EU slid into a deep freeze; for example, the EU - Israeli Association Council, which is supposed to convene annually, last met in 2012. Former Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi succeeded in improving relations with most EU member states during his brief one year stint in office, but he did not succeed in holding a meeting of the Association Council. French President Macron expressed his desire for the resumption of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and promised France's help to both sides. Although the prospects of resuming the peace process under such a polarized government headed by Bennett are slim, a more positive discourse on the issue by incoming Foreign Minister Lapid, and no outright rejection by Prime Minister Bennett, could pave the way for resuming the institutional high-level dialogue and to upgrade Israel's relationship with the EU, its chief trade and innovation partner. As a former high-tech entrepreneur, Bennett presumably recognizes the value of the EU for Israel, especially in light of its impending participation in the Horizon Europe research and innovation program, in which the EU is expected to invest 95 billion Euro in the next seven years. This is a potential source of growth and development, which the Israeli economy needs and from which it will benefit. Lapid must ensure and mobilize Bennett's support for this move. At the very least, he should add Brussels to his first year's foreign travel schedule.

Does a Pan-Tribal Coalition Guarantee Equal Partnership in Government?

Sana Knaneh

Researcher, Mitvim Institute

The new government, with its eight member parties and 28 ministers, indicates the potential internal disintegration of the Zionist project if it continues to rely on the representation of certain groups and exclusion of all others that make up Israeli society. Nonetheless, the new government represents two important changes. One is the end of the Netanyahu era and its destruction of democracy; the other is the unveiling of all the tears and divisions within Israeli society, which, unless they are healed, will continue to overshadow the lives of all Israelis. The need to connect eight parties with such varied agendas, from the right-wing Zionist settlement movement to the Islamic movement of Israel's Palestinian citizens, illustrates that Israeli

society can no longer ignore any of its societal groups. The question is whether a seat at the coalition table guarantees true partnership in governance, or if Ra'am's inclusion in the coalition will turn out to be devoid of influence and serve only as a PR tool for the government to block international criticism of Israel's racist policies vis-a-vis its Arab-Palestinian residents. As a Palestinian citizen of Israel, I do not view Ra'am's entry into the coalition as a historic change, especially since its tamed leader has agreed to limit the party's ambitions to civilian issues, severing our irrefutable link with our Palestinian nation. I also cannot see a positive development in the appointment of a prime minister who advocates for Israeli sovereignty over Area C in Judea and Samaria. Naftali Bennett is simply the new face of the same old policy that perpetuates the occupation and expands the theft of Palestinian lands. His policies will continue to manage the conflict for the benefit of the Jewish side, while ignoring the Palestinian people's right to self-determination in its homeland.

The New US and Israeli Administrations: An Opportunity to Turn the Page

Former Diplomat Nadav Tamir
Board Member, Mitvim Institute

The similar approaches by President Biden and Foreign Minister Lapid may bring about change in relations between the two countries, despite the new government's limited ability to lead significant initiatives. The very return to the traditional approach of mutual respect between the countries marks the beginning of a necessary healing process. Israel must return to its position as a close ally capable of dealing constructively with disagreements, not through the media or intervention in American politics. In this context, Israel could influence the nuclear agreement with Iran to its benefit if it cooperates with the US to improve it, rather than fighting the Biden Administration's intentions to return to the agreement. Israel should also work together with President Biden to strengthen moderates within the PA and contain Hamas in a way conducive to addressing Gaza's humanitarian needs without perpetuating Hamas rule. Israel has to avoid unilateral actions in Jerusalem and Area C, coordinating with the Biden Administration to avoid embarrassing the Jordanians, Egyptians and Israel's new normalization partners. The partnership between the White House and the new Israeli government could turn the page on Israeli-American relations and Israeli relations with liberal democracies around the world, especially in Europe, if the Israeli government turns its backs on the populist, authoritarian regimes with which Netanyahu and Trump allied their two countries.

Tensions in Jerusalem Stem from Government Neglect, Which Risks Exacerbating Tensions with Jordan

Former MK Ksenia Svetlova
Director of the Program on Israel-Middle East Relations, Mitvim Institute

The new government must re-prioritize Israel's relations with Jordan's Hashemite Kingdom and take immediate actions to improve them. The Netanyahu government rendered Jordan irrelevant to its policies and therefore undermined Israel's strategic relationships in the region. Prime Minister Bennett and Foreign Minister Lapid can and must repair the damage that has been done. In the short term, it would be advisable to schedule phone calls and meetings with the Jordanians, and in the long term advance shared projects on water, energy and new technologies that will contribute to stronger bilateral relations.