



Israel's October 27 Knesset election may prove decisive, but not for the issues closest to the hearts of Middle East analysts: solving the Palestinian problem, disarming Hamas and Hezbollah, dealing a fatal blow to the Islamic Republic of Iran, or strengthening the Abraham Accords. However, if Israel can break out of its current straitjacket of two uncooperative political blocs, it may be able to address two dangerous internal developments: the burgeoning ultra-Orthodox sector that neither serves in the IDF nor receives a modern education, and the danger of a third intifada sparked by Jewish violence against Palestinians in the West Bank. A Zionist unity government that replaces the current coalition/opposition dichotomy could strengthen Israel's security, protect its robust high-tech economy, and eventually put the state in a better situation to address other crucial issues, both domestic and foreign. (Credit: Shutterstock)

MIDDLE EAST QUARTERLY · FALL 2026

For a 'Big Bang' in Israeli Politics

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Israel will hold Knesset elections on October 27, 2026, but a dark cloud already hangs over the contest. Polls predict the most likely outcome to be a hung Knesset in which neither Benjamin Netanyahu's full-right coalition nor any combination of opposition Zionist parties elects the 61-plus Members of Knesset (MK) needed to form a government.¹ The dreary prospect of a series of Knesset elections, akin to the 2019–2022 triennium, with Netanyahu's coalition remaining in power, looms.

The exception to this electoral instability has been Netanyahu's current government, which has lasted its full four-year term, a rare occurrence in Israeli politics.² This does not, however, suggest that the current coalition, comprising Likud, two far-right parties (Bezael Smotrich's Religious Zionism and Itamar Ben Gvir's Jewish Power), and two Haredi parties (United Torah Judaism and

Shas) is likely to repeat its successful November 2022 surprise performance. Netanyahu's coalition reached 64 Knesset seats then largely because of tactical electoral errors by his opponents: The center-left Labor Party refused to run a joint list with the leftist Meretz Party, resulting in the latter falling just under the 3.25 percent vote threshold to enter the Knesset. Moreover, the Arab-Israeli Balad Party ran alone instead of in tandem with other Arab parties, missing entering the Knesset by just 17,000 votes. Had Meretz and Labor run together and Balad joined other Arab parties, Netanyahu's majority would likely have been reduced to 60, insufficient to form a government. Second, the Likud coalition has failed to fully recover from the blow dealt to it by the October 7 Hamas massacres, despite military successes against Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran. At its nadir in November 2023, the

governing coalition was polling only 41 seats; it has clawed its way back to about 50 but remains stuck there.³

The most frequently mentioned alternative to Netanyahu's current coalition is a government led by former IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot's Yashar list, in coalition with a number of other centrist, rightist, and leftist lists. Even if the Zionist opposition wins fewer than 61 seats, it could, as in 2021, invite Mansour Abbas's moderate United Arab List (UAL) party into a new coalition, with Abbas's projected 4–5 Knesset seats putting it over the top. The other main option involves several nascent centrist groupings that are currently playing coy about their post-election intentions. These include an alliance of Blue and White Party leader Benny Gantz with several small groups also polling near or under the 3.25 percent threshold, as well as a party representing IDF reserve soldiers and another composed of former Likud MKs. Polls suggest that if these parties join forces, they could win up to 7 Knesset seats.⁴

Since October 7, Netanyahu has focused on staying in power, staying out of prison, and managing the wars against Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran. He has used all the chips he has accumulated over 40 years in Israeli politics to hold his disparate coalition together, which, in practice, has meant largely maintaining the domestic status quo in Israel and the West Bank.

But since most of these votes come from sectors that already support the opposition, at best they would help form governments with barely 61 to 62 Knesset seats, which would constantly be on the verge of collapse due to sectoral, party, and individual demands. The Netanyahu–Gantz government of 2020–2021 collapsed a year after Netanyahu violated the coalition agreement by refusing to pass a budget for 2021.⁵ The Bennett–Lapid government similarly dissolved after little more than a year when members of Yamina jumped ship, depriving Bennett of a Knesset majority.⁶

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against Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran. He has used all the chips he has accumulated over 40 years in Israeli politics to hold his disparate coalition together, which, in practice, has meant largely maintaining the domestic status quo in Israel and the West Bank. This has frozen any efforts to address what are arguably the two most serious internal challenges facing Israel today: integrating the Haredi population into the Israeli Jewish mainstream and squelching Jewish terrorism against Palestinians in the West Bank.

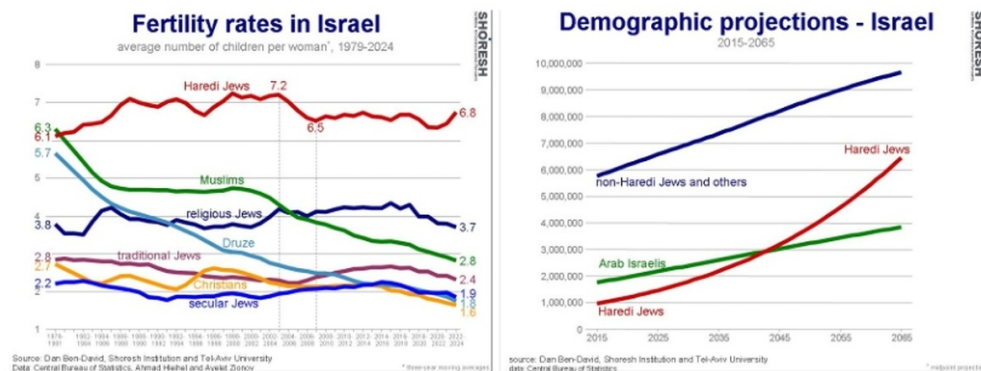
The Haredi Challenge

Israel's Haredim (also called the ultra-Orthodox) are a large and fast-growing segment of its population. The earliest reliable data on this group date from 1979, when it comprised 212,000 individuals, or 5.6 percent of Israel's inhabitants.⁷ Now, there are almost 1.5 million Haredim—roughly 14.3 percent of Israel's population.⁸ The group's annual population growth rate of 4.2 percent is the highest of any sector in the country, vastly surpassing Israel's overall population growth rate of 1.1 percent.⁹ Already, about one in four Jewish first graders is Haredi. According to Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, Haredim will account for about 20 percent of Israel's overall population by 2040 and 24.4 percent by 2050 and comprise even higher percentages of the country's Jewish population.¹⁰

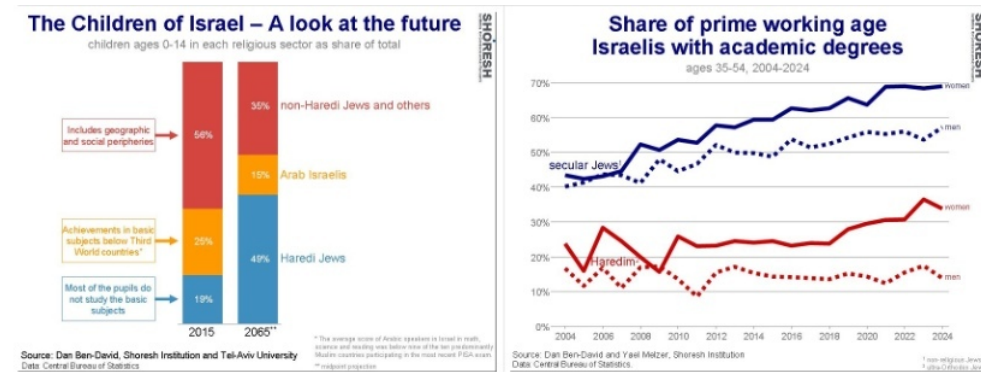
The most immediate risk posed by the Haredim is their refusal to serve in the IDF, which threatens the long-term health of Israel's military. Although before October 7 Israelis often complained that the Haredim were not “bearing their share of the military burden,” the issue was of secondary concern, primarily because the IDF itself was not eager to tackle the many problems involved in drafting the ultra-Orthodox. Since the end of the Cold War, Israel's generals have emphasized—in former IDF Chief of Staff Ehud Barak's phrase—that a “small and smart” military relies on air power, special operations, and high tech rather than large infantry, armor, and artillery units to counter Israel's threats.¹¹ The IDF felt it could mold such a small and smart force by relying on the standard pool of Israeli Jews already subject to the draft without taking on the headaches involved in recruiting Haredim.

October 7 destroyed this illusion. The IDF now recognizes that it needs many more infantry, tank, and artillery divisions to fulfill its post-October 7 mission of robust border security and throttling foreign threats in the cradle. At the heart of this change is the replacement of “deterrence and containment” with “a proactive and continuous dismantling of enemy capabilities as they form around Israel, both near and far.”¹² In March of this year, IDF Chief of Staff Eyal Zamir delivered a blunt assessment

to Israel’s security cabinet: The IDF needs at least 15,000 additional soldiers (including 8,000 combat troops) as soon as possible to man enhanced infantry and armor units. Zamir warned that the IDF had been constantly at war since October 7 and could “collapse in on itself” from the strain of tackling missions in the West Bank, Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Iran simultaneously.¹³



Israel’s demographic trajectory is being reshaped by sharply differing fertility rates among its religious sectors, with the Haredi population projected to grow substantially as a share of the country’s population in the coming decades. (Credit: Shores Institute for Socioeconomic Research)



Demographic trends among Israel’s children point to major changes in the country’s future population, while large disparities in academic attainment among working-age Israelis underscore the socioeconomic challenges accompanying those shifts. (Credit: Shores Institute for Socioeconomic Research)

There is only one source for these bodies: Israel’s almost 1.5 million Haredim. There are approximately 80,000 Haredi males between the ages of 18 and 25; only a few hundred have responded positively to the IDF’s most recent draft orders.¹⁴ In fact, the number of Haredim drafted into the IDF actually declined by 36 percent between 2013 and 2023, according to the Israel Democracy Institute.¹⁵ The Haredi parties joined Netanyahu’s current coalition in

December 2022 only after he promised to legalize Haredi draft dodging. Netanyahu has been as good as his word; he removed the Likud chairman of the Knesset’s Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee because he refused to countenance a bill with enough loopholes to satisfy the Haredi political parties’ demand for legalization. Netanyahu then appointed a committee chair who so weakened the original bill that the Israeli press commonly

refers to it as the “draft evasion” legislation.¹⁶

When this bill bogged down in committee, Netanyahu then proposed a “Basic Law” that all but equates Haredi Torah study with IDF service and another law—quickly frozen by Israel’s Supreme Court—that would have mandated that Haredi draft dodgers go free while allowing the police to detain secular draft evaders.¹⁷ Netanyahu now stands in contempt of a Supreme Court ruling requiring him to apply the draft equitably to all Jewish Israelis but has achieved his immediate goal of convincing the Haredi parties that he will go to bat for them and that they should not consider deals with any party other than Likud after the elections.

Drafting Haredim is only the first step toward an even more important goal: bringing Haredi society into the twenty-first century so that it can be a net contributor to, instead of a net drain on, Israel’s economy. This does not mean interfering with Haredi religious sensibilities or the group’s pronounced clannishness. It does mean resolving the community’s severe secular educational deficit. Some 84 percent of Haredi male secondary school students do not study any core curriculum subjects—English, mathematics, and science.¹⁸ Most male graduates are qualified only for menial and low-wage work, and almost half do not work at all. Those who do work earn 40 percent less than non-Haredi men.¹⁹ Haredi women, who do not engage in the men’s extensive Talmud studies, receive a substantial dose of the core curriculum in high school, enabling them to be employed at a rate of about 80 percent, just under that of non-Haredi women. However, Haredi women are concentrated in low-paying sectors—education and health care—and earn about 25 percent less than their non-Haredi counterparts.²⁰ The root of these discrepancies is clear: Haredim are not learning the skills necessary to participate in Israel’s complex and technologically sophisticated economy.²¹

According to the Israel Democracy Institute’s Haredi Studies Program, “the continuation of current trends of limited social, economic and military integration of Haredim will lead to a substantial deterioration in Israel’s economy and national resilience.” In a scenario in which the current shape of Haredi society does not significantly change during the next 25 years, Israel’s GDP per capita

could decline by 10 percent, or 160 billion shekels, in 2023 GDP terms.²² This net drain on the economy will continue to rise as Haredim become a larger and larger share of Israel’s population. This future spells disaster: Israel simply cannot maintain itself as a first world country with a high-tech, innovation-driven economy and a superior military alongside the rapid expansion of “[the Haredi] low-employment, low-education sector.” Education reforms, workforce integration, and changes to welfare policies are necessary if Israel is to avoid a situation in which “a shrinking workforce supports an unsustainable number of dependents, leading to economic stagnation and reduced quality of life for all.”²³ The Haredi drag on the economy jeopardizes the future of all Israelis.

Settler Violence

Growing Jewish terrorism against Palestinians in the West Bank is the other severe problem that Israel must address urgently. Although the challenge here is not on the scale of the Haredi one, it is corroding Israel’s already battered international reputation and turning the West Bank into a tinderbox that could explode at any moment. Settler violence is not a new phenomenon. In the 1980s, Israeli security services dismantled a Jewish underground that strove to blow up the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Settler violence has become widespread and overt in subsequent years and has risen sharply since October 7. Reliable statistics are hard to find, but Tel Aviv University’s Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) cites an IDF Central Command report that assesses a 27 percent increase in settler violence in 2025 alone, along with a rise in the severity of the attacks: It classified 120 incidents in 2025 as severe compared to 83 in 2024.²⁴ The trend has continued into 2026, with the number of serious incidents of “nationalistic crime” surging by 63 percent during the first half of 2026 compared to the same period in 2025.²⁵ This violence cannot be dismissed as settler responses to Palestinian provocations. Thanks to aggressive IDF and Shin Bet counterterrorist operations since October 7, Palestinian-initiated violence in the West Bank has sharply declined: In the first quarter of 2025, for example, attacks against Palestinians surged by approximately 30 percent, while during the same period the number of Palestinian terrorist attacks declined by about 40 per-

cent.²⁶

Although only a small slice of settler society—frequently referred to as the Hilltop Youth—is directly involved in this violence, its lethality and consequences remain significant. The Hilltop Youth vandalize Palestinian property, poison water sources, burn agricultural fields and entire Palestinian villages, and systematically deny Palestinian peasants access to their land. Settlers violently expelled the residents of up to 50 Palestinian communities from 2022 to 2024.²⁷ These activists do not hide their ultimate goal: removing Arab inhabitants from rural areas of the West Bank and repopulating them with Jewish settlers. Smotrich, the West Bank point man in the current government, has approved 22 new settlements and legalized scores of previously illegal ones, thus laying the ground for the eventual Israeli annexation of all or most of the West Bank.

Although the Netanyahu government pays lip service to the importance of law and order in these territories, its actions belie any serious effort to control the violence. One of Defense Minister Israel Katz's first acts in office was to suspend preventive detention for suspected Jewish terrorists while retaining it for Palestinian ones. The IDF, overwhelmed by hot wars in Gaza, Lebanon, and elsewhere, has openly admitted its failure to crack down on settler violence during the last two years.²⁸ Israel's National Police, under hardline anti-Palestinian National Security Minister Ben Gvir, has devoted more attention in the West Bank to protecting rather than to restraining the Hilltop Youth; one Israeli human rights group assesses that just 3 percent of settler attacks have resulted in court convictions.²⁹

Settler violence in the territories poses two severe dangers for Israel. First, it could spark even more violent reactions from Palestinians, which could quickly develop into something resembling a third intifada. The head of the IDF's Central Command—which includes the West Bank—has explicitly warned that “Jewish terrorism . . . is causing unimaginable damage to Israel and the Zionist project” and may trigger widespread Palestinian terrorism in response.³⁰ With the IDF bogged down in Lebanon and Gaza and suffering from intense battle fatigue, this is a scenario that Israel should try to avoid at all costs. Second,

international reactions are further staining Israel's image as a Western-style democracy that enshrines the rule of law. The U.S. Military Academy at West Point, an institution not characterized by anti-Israel bias, concludes that Jerusalem must “take all feasible measures to put an end to settler violence, including through physical security measures, law enforcement, and legal accountability.”³¹ Most European countries and the European Union have strongly condemned this violence, and in the United States, congresspersons—including Jewish ones—and the Republican Speaker of the House have called for sanctions against any Israelis involved in anti-Palestinian violence.³² The U.K., Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Norway have already frozen the assets of, and denied entry to, Minister Ben Gvir. Israel cannot coherently continue to claim that it remains “the only democracy in the Middle East” while casting a blind eye to its citizens' rampages throughout the West Bank.

Political Implications

Barring a major political realignment, there are three likely outcomes to the upcoming election: a hung Knesset and new elections, a narrowly based government led by the current opposition, or the re-election of Netanyahu's full-right government. The latter is only possible if Netanyahu's poll ratings soar (possibly as a result of favorable developments in the wars with Iran and Hezbollah) and/or if several self-described centrist parties do better than expected and join Netanyahu's next government.³³ But even a slightly more broadly based full-right government would not address the Haredi draft and Jewish terrorism problems. The Haredi parties' *raison d'être* is to keep Haredim out of the army and to keep government funds flowing to Haredi institutions. They have been inflexible on these issues under the current government and will continue to be so under any future one. Similarly, Ben Gvir's and Smotrich's *Weltanschauung* is of a West Bank ethnically cleansed of Palestinians; they will not abandon the violent Hilltop Youth who form the tip of the spear of this endeavor.

Today's opposition leaders, however, are prepared to tackle these issues, yet a version 2.0 of Bennett's “change government”—a narrowly based administration with 61

or 62 Knesset seats—would almost certainly not be strong enough to succeed. It might make initial progress in reining in Jewish violence in the West Bank, especially if the new prime minister replaced the current government’s police commissioner and the head of Shin Bet, neither of

whom see Jewish terrorism as a significant threat. The Hilltop Youth may resort to even more violence, but they lack a significant constituency inside Israel, outside of supporters of the far right.



Hundreds of thousands of Haredim gathered at the entrance to Jerusalem on October 30, 2025, for a mass prayer rally against military conscription and the arrest of yeshiva students who had failed to report for IDF service. The contentious issue of Haredi conscription has emerged as a major fault line in Israeli politics ahead of the 2026 election. (Credit: Shutterstock)

The Haredi problem, however, is much thornier and will immediately challenge the cohesion of a government relying on 61 or 62 Members of Knesset. The Knesset’s Haredi parties are mere factotums: the real authority lies with the parties’ Councils of Torah Sages, mostly 80- or 90-year-old Torah scholars with little, if any, experience outside the closed Haredi world. The Sephardic Shas Party’s Torah Sages recently condemned all efforts to recruit Haredim into the IDF as “wag[ing] war against the Lord and His Torah . . . with the deliberate intention of assimilating and integrating the Haredi community into secular culture.”³⁴ The Ashkenazi Torah Greats have publicly ordered all Haredim to ignore IDF draft call-ups, arguing that Torah study alone protects the Jewish people and that Jews “are being killed [in battle] because we don’t learn enough.”³⁵

These rabbis may live in an alternate universe where

Talmud study is a bulletproof vest, but they know how to wield power in twenty-first-century Israel. When last year it briefly looked like Netanyahu’s Haredi draft bill might have real teeth, Haredi leaders called for a “million-man rally” in Jerusalem that brought the city to a standstill under the slogan “We would rather die than enlist.”³⁶ Haredi leaders have established a sophisticated information and action network that counsels young men on how to evade the draft and sends gangs to harass police trying to arrest Haredim for draft dodging and “rescue” the few Haredi young men who want to serve from the clutches of the IDF. This determination extends to keeping Haredi students in schools that ignore the core curriculum. According to the Torah Greats, doing otherwise—even in state-funded Haredi schools that also teach math and science—is “embezzling God’s deposit” and “an unbearable sin.”³⁷

Glimmers of light, such as a few Haredi-friendly IDF units or a handful of Haredim acquiring modern skills, are the exception, not the rule. Israel will have to confront the Haredi challenge head-on by withholding state support for Haredi institutions that do not teach the core curriculum and by sanctioning individuals (and their yeshivas) who refuse the draft. Haredi society is a house of cards built on massive state subsidies extorted by ultra-Orthodox political parties; remove that flow of money and its current configuration will collapse.

A narrow Change 2.0 government, however, will be hard-pressed to maintain the cohesion and determination needed to effect such a major long-term societal change. Haredi opposition will be fierce, but obstruction by Likud

and other parties will be almost as great. Likud never accepted the legitimacy of the Bennett-Lapid “change government” and worked assiduously from day one to emasculate it. Likud used every parliamentary trick in the book, threats of violence against Knesset members, and widespread civic mobilization to wound and eventually kill that experiment. There is no reason for Likud to be any better disposed toward another such government. All the opposition would need is one or two defectors or absentees to deprive a Change 2.0 government of a workable Knesset majority or at least bog down its legislative initiatives in endless parliamentary maneuvering.³⁸



Naftali Bennett



Yair Lapid



Gadi Eisenkot

Naftali Bennett, Yair Lapid, and Gadi Eisenkot are among the opposition figures seeking to reshape Israel's political landscape ahead of the 2026 election. (Credit: Wikimedia Commons. Bennett: CC0/public domain; Lapid and Eisenkot: U.S. Department of State/public domain)

The Zionist Unity Government Alternative

A government willing and capable of tackling Israel's major internal challenges is feasible, but only if the current political mold of Netanyahu's “full right” coalition versus a motley Zionist opposition is broken. A Zionist unity government, including most Zionist parties, should replace the current model. Such a government would exclude the Haredi parties, which will never consent to sacrificing their privileges, and Smotrich's Religious Zionism and Ben Gvir's Jewish Power, both of which

tacitly endorse settler violence and channel Israel's scarce financial resources to settlements in the West Bank rather than to more pressing needs within the Green Line. A Zionist unity government would reach from the right (Likud, Bennett, and Avigdor Lieberman's Israel Beytenu Party) to the center-left (Lapid, Eisenkot, and Gantz) and possibly Yair Golan's Leftist Democrats. The prime minister would probably come from the largest party in the Knesset, either Likud, the Bennett-Lapid Beyachad (Together) alliance, or Gadi Eisenkot's Yashar (Straight Ahead) Party.

As of late August, the main innovation in the race has been the emergence of former IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot's Yashar party as the leading opposition force. Eisenkot has great appeal as a grieving father—his soldier son was killed in the Gaza war—and as a Mizrahi Israeli whose parents emigrated from Morocco. If successful, Eisenkot would be Israel's first non-Ashkenazi prime minister. Some polls have shown Yashar, projected to win 23 Knesset seats, pulling ahead of Likud with 22 and leaving the Bennett/Lapid Together coalition far behind at 13.³⁹ Eisenkot has explicitly stated that he will collaborate only with parties that advocate Haredi conscription and will work to end lawlessness in the West Bank.⁴⁰ The downside to the Eisenkot phenomenon is that thus far he has primarily attracted voters already opposed to Netanyahu; he has yet to induce significant numbers of potential voters to cross from the government into the opposition camp.

More than the emergence of a leader such as Eisenkot must happen for the “big bang” in Israeli politics to succeed. First, Netanyahu needs to abandon his current Haredi and far-right allies. The prime minister is probably not wedded to his current coalition, which has caused him many political headaches: the divisive judicial reform initiative, the Haredi draft evasion bill, the millions of shekels allocated to Haredi institutions instead of to citizens living along the Lebanese border and the Gaza envelope, far-right settler violence heating up the West Bank, and calls for Jewish settlements in Gaza. Finance Minister Smotrich has recently upped the ante by calling to annex and settle southern Lebanon up to the Litani River.⁴¹

Netanyahu is most certainly not wedded to the full collection of albatrosses that his coalition allies have hung around his neck. He has governed from the center in the past: His second government included former Labor Prime Minister Ehud Barak and his third included both Bennett and Lapid. Under pressure from President Obama in 2009, he even publicly accepted at least the theoretical possibility of a two-state solution.⁴² Justice Minister Yariv Levin (not Netanyahu) was the force behind the judicial overhaul offensive that divided and weakened Israel on the eve of October 7.⁴³ Netanyahu's Haredi partners—oblivious to the unpopularity of legalizing draft dodging in the middle

of a life-and-death war—forced the legislation on him by threatening numerous times to bring down his government.⁴⁴ One could even argue that, as long as Netanyahu or his successor keeps tight control of Likud, governing with much of the current opposition would be less of a challenge than juggling the many outrageous actions and demands of his existing far-right and Haredi partners. In late June Netanyahu hinted as much publicly when he said that after the elections he “intends to form a broad national government,” although, other than disqualifying the Arab parties, he was mum about its composition.⁴⁵ Netanyahu, however, never fights on one front alone: To buttress his current coalition partners during the election campaign he then clarified that he would not abandon the Haredim, Smotrich, and Ben Gvir. He detailed goals for “a broad national government” to which both his ultra-Orthodox and far-right coalition partners could adhere, since they did not call for drafting the Haredim or imposing law and order in the West Bank.⁴⁶

Second, the current opposition must abandon its boycott of the prime minister. The boycott only solidified in November 2019 when Netanyahu was indicted in three different cases for bribery, fraud, and breach of trust and declined to leave office. If Netanyahu remains head of Likud and a contender to continue as prime minister after the next election, Bennett, Eisenkot, Lieberman, and Lapid will all have to deal with him, warts and all.⁴⁷ Given the opposition's division into several competing blocs, Likud may well remain the Knesset's largest party after the election and thus have the first crack at forming a government. Removing the far right and the Haredim from power should be reason enough for most opposition leaders to collaborate with their old nemesis, however much they swear the opposite in public today.

The opposition and Netanyahu will have to meet each other halfway: Just as the former will not budge on the need to address the Haredi problem and rein in Jewish violence in the West Bank, so the latter will demand movement on high-priority issues. Foremost among these is judicial overhaul, which remains one of the biggest lightning rods in Israeli politics. It is beyond the scope of this article to suggest how exactly to square this circle, but there are suggestions for compromises⁴⁸ that lie between

Likud's desire to decisively cripple the Supreme Court's powers and clip the attorney general's wings and the status quo supported by most of the opposition. Neither Likud nor the opposition wants to rekindle the knock-down, drag-out pre-October 7, intra-Jewish conflict that then-Defense Minister Gallant criticized for jeopardizing Israel's security.⁴⁹

Another issue that cannot be swept under the rug is establishing a credible state investigatory commission into the October 7 disaster akin to past Israeli commissions, which investigated responsibility for the Yom Kippur War and the Sabra and Shatila massacres in Lebanon.

Another issue that cannot be swept under the rug is establishing a credible state investigatory commission into the October 7 disaster akin to past Israeli commissions, which investigated responsibility for the Yom Kippur War and the Sabra and Shatila massacres in Lebanon. Polls show that 72 percent of Israelis want an independent state commission of inquiry⁵⁰ and see Netanyahu's push for a government-controlled one as a delaying tactic. Creating an unfettered commission is a sine qua non for the opposition; the likelihood of this happening will increase after the election because many IDF officers and government ministers (possibly including Netanyahu) who were asleep at the switch on October 7 will no longer be on active duty or in office. Nevertheless, workarounds to soften the blow are possible. For example, the law stipulates that the president of the Supreme Court selects commission members, but much of the right loathes current Supreme Court President Isaac Amit as a "leftist" who will stack the commission with similar "leftists." Amit, however, recently recused himself from any role in creating such a panel, delegating the task to his (more conservative) deputy.⁵¹ Another approach would be to involve President Isaac Herzog, who is not a partisan political actor, in the selection process.

In sum, despite Netanyahu's campaign-style avowals not to abandon his current coalition partners, his politics do not eternally wed him to defending Haredi draft dodging or turning a blind eye to unrestrained settler violence. His top

personal goals are remaining in power and not becoming the second Israeli prime minister to serve jail time. After the election, a Zionist unity government may be his best option to achieve one or both of these goals. Likewise, there are the previously mentioned indications that some center-right politicians are finding the Procrustean bed of the current full-right government increasingly uncomfortable. Disgruntled Likudniks such as Yuli Edelstein and Gilad Erdan see their new "third way" Unity Party, which is independent of Likud, as a way to maximize their post-election bargaining power and not as a refusal to serve in another Netanyahu government.⁵²

A third development is essential for a broad-based Zionist unity government to emerge after the election: President Herzog must pardon Netanyahu. He would be ill-advised to do this before the election; the Supreme Court can overrule a presidential pardon and might construe such a move as heavy-handed partisan electoral interference.⁵³ Doing so after the election, but before a new government is sworn in, would be less risky. It would admittedly short-circuit the judicial process by granting a pardon before a court conviction and without any admission of guilt on Netanyahu's part. There is no doubt, however, that the current opposition would find a Likud party led by someone other than Netanyahu much more palatable as a partner in bringing about this political "big bang." A pardon would enable Netanyahu to retire gracefully from politics while allowing Eisenkot and Bennett to ally with a Likud no longer led by Israel's most controversial politician.

Moving Forward

The objections to this political "big bang" are legion—but not convincing. The government and the opposition are both trying to consolidate their electoral bases in the run-up to the election, and even though many politicians may privately find the notion of political reconfiguration attractive, they are unlikely to push the option now for fear of alienating these very voters. The public debate centers primarily on which parties should not participate in the next government: the opposition insisting that the far right and the Haredim be excluded and the coalition warning against relying on the Democrats (a fusion of the

old Labor and Meretz Parties led by former IDF Deputy Chief of Staff Yair Golan) and the Arab parties.

Many of these anathemas are electoral rhetoric, but some may bear directly on post-electoral coalition building. Thus, it may prove impossible to exclude the Zionist far right (Jewish Power and Religious Zionism) from a Zionist unity government while including Golan's Zionist Democrats Party, which has become a *bête noire* for much of the Israeli right.⁵⁴ Recent polls suggest,⁵⁵ however, that even with its right and left wings clipped, electoral Zionism will retain enough Knesset seats to form a strong unity government after the next election. The Democrats, moreover, will support Haredi enlistment drives and actions against Jewish terrorism from outside the government.

The other challenge concerns Israel's Arab parties. Some already argue that, as with Bennett's brief "change government," a non-Likud coalition should include Mansour Abbas's moderate United Arab List Party, especially if the UAL's Members of Knesset enable it to get 61-plus Knesset seats. Although Likud has consistently denounced Bennett's 2021–2022 dalliance with Abbas, there is "a quiet, cynical consensus in Jerusalem" that Netanyahu might try the same thing were his coalition only a few seats shy of a majority.⁵⁶

Integrating Israeli Arabs—and especially the UAL, which accepts that Israel is a Jewish state—into the country's government and institutions is a laudable goal, but it will likely have to wait until the more immediate problems of Haredi draft dodging and Jewish terrorism are addressed.

The UAL's importance will decline, however, should the Zionist unity government described here prosper. In that case, Ra'am's Knesset members would be superfluous. Moreover, the next prime minister could plausibly argue that a government dedicated to making Haredim serve in the army and/or do national service cannot rely on a party like the UAL, whose voters are not drafted and do not perform significant national service. Integrating Israeli Arabs—and especially the UAL, which accepts that Israel is

a Jewish state—into the country's government and institutions is a laudable goal, but it will likely have to wait until the more immediate problems of Haredi draft dodging and Jewish terrorism are addressed. Sometimes the best is the enemy of the good.

Israeli Security Policy

And what of Israeli foreign policy and military strategy? Unlike in past elections, security policy will probably not play a decisive role in the upcoming balloting. True, Netanyahu's opponents accuse him of not attaining the "total victory" he promised in Gaza, Lebanon, and Iran. They are less vocal about the alternatives, especially since pushing forward alone on these fronts would alienate Washington, a crucial factor given Israel's extra-close ties to the United States under President Trump. Moreover, there is a general consensus that even the partial defeats of Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran have substantially improved Israel's overall strategic posture, even if much remains to be done. A Zionist unity government—especially if not led by Netanyahu, who can barely visit Europe because of ICC warrants against him—would likely devote more time and attention to placating the European Union so that it will not place economic sanctions on Israel. But a wholesale shift in foreign and security policy is highly unlikely. All Zionist parties support Israel's new emphasis on building up a strong regular military, which nips security threats in the bud, rather than relying on the "lean and mean" formula of the past. Moreover, most Israeli voters still hold the Mossad, the Shin Bet, and the IDF in high esteem and see them as originators and not merely implementers of the new strategy. In short, a vote against the coalition would not be a repudiation of Israel's post-October 7 security policies but would primarily stem from domestic considerations, such as opposition to Haredi draft dodging and the 2023 judicial overhaul, the lack of an independent October 7 commission, and embarrassment at and opposition to the antics, both verbal and actual, of Ben Gvir and Smotrich.⁵⁷

In the recent past, being on either the Zionist left or the Zionist right in Israel depended primarily on one's attitude toward "land for peace" and the two-state solution, with the left supporting such initiatives and the right opposing

them. The country's recent history has jumbled this alignment. Most Zionists of all hues now agree that, after the disastrous consequences of Israel's unilateral withdrawals from southern Lebanon and Gaza, creating a Palestinian state is off the near- and medium-term agenda. While a vocal minority continues to call for annexation of the West Bank, whatever the costs, President Trump's firm opposition to any such move has sidelined (for the present) this objective.⁵⁸ Now that most Israeli Zionists, save for the followers of Smotrich and Ben Gvir, recognize that a final settlement to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not around the corner, cooperation between Zionism's moderate left and moderate right is possible. Moreover, a Zionist unity government, whether headed by Netanyahu or one of his rivals, would be well placed to strengthen Israel's mostly

successful post-October 7 military and security strategy, especially if substantial numbers of Haredim are recruited into the IDF and Israel lessens the chances of a third intifada by cracking down on Jewish lawlessness across the Green Line.

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NOTES

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- 44 Mohamed Mahmoud Al-Sayed, "Netanyahu's Government at a Crossroads: Three Scenarios Following Haredi Parties' Withdrawal" (Future for Advanced Research and Studies, Abu Dhabi, U.A.E., July 25, 2025), <https://futureuae.com/en-US/Mainpage/Item/10329/netanyahus-government-at-a-crossroads-three-scenarios-following-haredi-parties-withdrawal>.

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- 46 Benjamin Netanyahu (@netanyahu), “ישראל זקוקה ממשלה - לאומית רחבה - וזו הממשלה שאקים [Israel needs a broad national government—and that is the government I will establish],” X, June 28, 2026, <https://x.com/netanyahu/status/2071261392435384568>. The goals were mostly bland generalities that most non-Arab Israeli parties could endorse: that Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish people; that Israel should defend itself with its own military forces and ensure its economic, energy, and armament independence; and that there should be no Palestinian state.
- 47 One of the reasons Netanyahu will fiercely struggle to remain prime minister after the election is a quirk in Israeli law that allows a criminally indicted prime minister to remain in office but requires all other ministers to resign. Thus, unless the president pardons him and allows him to continue in politics in a subordinate position, Netanyahu cannot accept any office other than prime minister and remain politically active. See Ofer Kenig and Guy Lurie, “A Prime Minister Under Criminal Investigation” (Israel Democracy Institute, August 13, 2017), <https://en.idi.org.il/articles/18586>.
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- 54 The right tends to view the Democrats as identical to the old Labor–Meretz alliance, whose trading of “land for peace” allegedly laid the ground for October 7. In fact, Golan has said that both land for peace and a Palestinian state are off the table for now in the aftermath of the Hamas war. Golan has also strongly condemned France, Spain, and other countries for recognizing a nonexistent Palestinian state. Yet Golan is sometimes his own worst enemy. He failed to be promoted to IDF chief of staff in part because of a speech he made in 2016, in which he likened trends in Israeli society at the time to those in Nazi Germany in the 1930s. Last year, he made an off-the-cuff radio remark that “a sane country does not wage war against civilians, does not kill babies for a hobby, and does not set goals involving the expulsion of populations,” which drew strong condemnation across the Jewish political spectrum. Netanyahu, for example, accused him of “echoing the most despicable anti-Semitic blood libels against the [Israeli army] and the State of Israel.” See “Israeli Politician Slammed for Saying Country Should Not ‘Kill Babies for a Hobby,’” *CTV News*, May 20, 2025, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/world/israel-hamas-war/article/israeli-politician-slammed-for-saying-country-should-not-kill-babies-for-a-hobby>.
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