

# Israeli president tries to ease U.S. concerns about radical right ahead of elections

Barak Ravid October 29, 2022



U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken meets Israeli President Isaac Herzog in Washington, DC, on Oct. 25. Photo: Stefani Reynolds/AFP via Getty Images

During his visit to Washington earlier this week, Israeli President Isaac Herzog tried to ease the Biden administration's concerns about the expected rise of the radical right in the upcoming elections and asked U.S. officials to wait until the government is formed before jumping to conclusions, five Israeli and U.S. officials told Axios.

**Why it matters:** The Biden administration is concerned that if opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu wins Tuesday's elections, he will form a government with extreme right-wing parties and Jewish supremacists, including Itamar Ben Gvir and Bezalel Smortich, will be made senior ministers and be part of the security cabinet.

**State of play:** Netanyahu will need the support of Ben Gvir, who was convicted in 2007 of supporting a terror organization and inciting racism, and Smotrich, who has a history of making racist remarks about Arab citizens of Israel, in order to form a government if his right-wing bloc wins a 61-seat majority in the Knesset.

- The last polls before the elections, published on Friday night, showed 60-60 tie between opposition leader Netanyahu's right-wing bloc and Prime Minister Yair Lapid's center-left bloc.
- The "Religious Zionism" list, led by Ben Gvir and Smotrich, is expected to win 13 Knesset seats in the election, according to the latest polls. The list would become the third-largest party in the Israeli parliament.
- It would also mark an unprecedented rise in power of the extreme right and could have a dramatic influence on the government if Netanyahu wins.

**Behind the scenes:** Israeli and U.S. officials said both Secretary of State Tony Blinken and White House National Security adviser Jake Sullivan in their meetings with Herzog this week raised the administration's concerns about the potential inclusion of extreme right-wing politicians in a future Israeli government.

- Blinken and Sullivan didn't refer to any specific Israeli politicians, but it was clear the concerns were about Ben Gvir and Smotrich, the officials said. "We expressed our anxiety to Herzog," one U.S. official told Axios.
- Israeli and U.S. officials told Axios that both Blinken and Sullivan made it clear to Herzog that the Biden administration will work with any government the Israeli public elects, but hinted they might have a problem working with specific members if they are ministers.
- A senior Biden administration official told Axios that Sullivan discussed with Herzog several political scenarios that could unfold after the elections and different coalitions that might be formed. The official said Sullivan didn't convey any "or else" message to Herzog.
- The U.S. official said the administration recognizes it might take some time before a new Israeli government can be formed. The official added that the administration supports Israel's democracy fully.

**Three Israeli officials** told Axios that during his meetings with Blinken and Sullivan, Herzog explained in detail the process that will take place after the voting is over and until a new government is formed. Herzog stressed it is a long process and that several weeks could pass before it's clear what kind of government will be sworn in.

- Herzog also explained that there is a huge difference between the exit polls on election night and the formation of a government.
- Herzog told the U.S. officials that he knows the administration is watching the elections closely and asked them to "calm down and not to jump to conclusions after the exit polls are published," two Israeli officials who attended his meetings said. The Israeli president stressed that it was important to "let the democratic process take its course."
- The Israeli officials said Herzog told Blinken that there is a difference between the rhetoric of the different political leaders during the campaign and their actions on the day after the elections. "I ask that you judge more carefully what you see right now because it is not always what will eventually happen," Herzog told Blinken, per the Israeli officials.

- “Every country has problems in its political system. You experience this here in the U.S. too,” Herzog also told Blinken, the Israeli officials added.

**What they're saying:** A State Department spokesperson said they "are not going to comment on our private, diplomatic discussions."

- Herzog's office declined to comment.

**Worth noting:** Israeli and U.S. officials said that the Israeli elections were not discussed during Herzog's meeting with Biden.