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Yair Lapid's Vision For a New Israeli Future

The unlikely architect of Israel's current government wants to unite the country's Jewish and Arab mainstream against anti-democratic extremists. But will he find enough takers?

By Yair Rosenberg DECEMBER 22, 2021



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Yair Lapid is the next prime minister of Israel—at least on paper. According to the coalition agreement of the current Israeli government, he will assume office on August 27, 2023, replacing the present occupant, Naftali Bennett. Whether that rotation will

actually take place, given the cutthroat nature of Israeli politics, is another question entirely. But Lapid, a secular liberal who is currently serving as the country's foreign minister, is certainly conducting himself like a prime minister in waiting. In recent months, he has traversed the globe, met with world leaders from London to Abu Dhabi, and made public pronouncements on the future of Israeli democracy and other core challenges facing the Jewish state.

Many of these statements were made in Hebrew and so did not draw the attention of the international press. But being passed over in favor of flashier and more incendiary Israel story lines is nothing new for Lapid. Few pegged the 58-year-old former TV presenter and amateur boxer as a statesman with staying power when he entered politics in 2012. On the contrary, most media and pundits counted him out from the start. When Lapid's party won a remarkable 19 seats in its debut—the second-most in parliament—it was dismissed as the flavor of the month for an Israeli electorate that tended to churn through third-way parties like crisp falafel. In 2013, *The New Yorker* published a 9,000-word story about the future of Israeli politics and didn't even talk to Lapid. *Eretz Nehederet*, Israel's equivalent of *Saturday Night Live*, depicted him in flamboyant boxing shorts, refusing to take him seriously as a thinker or politician. According to this fashionable consensus, Lapid was a squishy telegenic dilettante who wasn't long for the arena.

They don't talk about him that way anymore.

Here's what's happened since then: In five of the six elections since Lapid entered politics, his party garnered the most votes after Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud. Then, in June 2021, Lapid successfully supplanted Israel's longest-serving leader, in arguably the most remarkable feat in Israeli political history. To

accomplish this, Lapid personally [brokered](#) an unwieldy alliance of settlers, centrists, and leftists—Arabs and Jews—and assembled the 61 Knesset seats required to unseat the Netanyahu government.



Lapid's portrayal on Israel's *SNL* in 2013 (left) versus 2021 (right)

Victory came at a price, however. In order to bring right-wingers on board, Lapid had to offer the prime ministership to settler leader Naftali Bennett, and let him go first in a five-year rotation, despite Bennett having just 7 seats to Lapid's 17. This arrangement ensured Netanyahu's removal from office, but it meant that there was a good chance that Lapid would never take his place, since it was far from certain that such a fractious coalition could last for several months, let alone years.

Today, though, the new government is still alive and kicking. Last month, it passed Israel's first budget in more than three years, overcoming the chief obstacle to its stability. With every day that

passes, the phrase “Prime Minister Lapid” seems less far-fetched, leading more people to ponder what it might mean.

Lapid named his political party *Yesh Atid*, which translates to “There is a future.” Like the man himself, the title has been derided by critics as eloquent but vacuous, and has understandably prompted the question: What future, exactly? As Lapid begins to spread his political wings, his vision for that next Israeli chapter has slowly come into focus. Earlier this month, we sat down to talk about it—and to discuss some of the more surprising statements he’s made in recent weeks.

Last October, Lapid [spoke](#) at the Knesset’s annual memorial for Yitzhak Rabin, the peace-seeking Israeli prime minister who was slain by a far-right activist in 1995. The event is typically a somber affair filled with apolitical exhortations against violence. But Lapid, whose coalition had only recently replaced Netanyahu amid an atmosphere of extremist incitement, did not come to deliver clichés.

“There’s a clear line between Rabin’s murder and the last year,” he opened. “Both are part of the great Israeli struggle. It’s not between right and left. The great Israeli struggle is between those who believe in democracy and those who are trying to destroy it.”

“Yigal Amir,” Rabin’s assassin, “wanted to murder the democratic idea,” Lapid continued. “He said to himself that the majority does not determine things—that he knew better. If someone says to themselves that the majority does not determine things, then they’re not really in the national camp. They’re an extremist and a dangerous nationalist. Instead of loving their country, they hate

anyone who does not think like them. Extremist nationalists are not patriots; extremist nationalism is not love of Israel.”

Then came the line that rocked the assembly: “The ideological descendants of Yigal Amir are sitting today in the Knesset,” Lapid declared. “They receive legitimacy; they are welcome guests in all the studios. If we had not performed this miracle, the government of change, they would now be ministers in the government.”

Lapid did not specifically name any members of parliament in his speech, but somewhat amusingly, Bezalel Smotrich—the [anti-Arab](#) leader of an alliance of small, far-right parties—erupted in outrage at Lapid’s remarks, effectively outing himself and his colleagues as the implied anti-democratic actors in question.

The speech, which made waves in Israel, was as much Lapid’s political credo as it was a commemoration of Rabin. It laid out the struggle for Israel’s future as he saw it, and his perceived place within it.

“This is what the elections were about,” he said. “This is the division between coalition and opposition. Not right and left, but rather those who believe in democracy against those who are fed up with democracy. Those who want to unite the nation, and those who want to tear it apart.”

Simply put, Lapid sees himself as a general marshaling the Israeli majority against an extremist minority, and everything he says is geared toward that goal. Unlike his nemesis Netanyahu, he resists attempts to pit different segments of society against each other, instead drawing a bright dividing line between a diverse Israeli mainstream that seeks a way to live together and the intolerant arsonists who seek to burn down their collective home. In his

rhetoric, Lapid tries to avoid pathologizing entire communities, eschewing stock political phrases like “Arab violence” or “settler violence” in favor of “extremist violence.” This big-tent approach has its critics, who say it lets culpable communities off the hook, but for Lapid, it is a point of principle. As he [put it](#) in a campaign speech, “You can’t talk from morning until evening about how much you love this country if you hate most of the people that live in it.”

In practice, this leads Lapid to a ruthless political pragmatism. When he became opposition leader in May 2020, he [told me](#) that we need fewer “theories” and more lawmakers who understand politics “as a managed conflict and less as a battle between two sides that want to kill each other.” Since assuming power, Lapid has put this mediating approach into practice, wrangling consensus from eight different parties that range from the hard-right to the Muslim Brotherhood. “If we disagree on something,” he said, we “sit down and discuss it and find something that won’t be 100% the way that I want it, and won’t be 100% the way you want it, but it’s going to *be*.”

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It wasn’t always this way. When he first entered Israel’s political arena, Lapid also claimed to represent the “mainstream.” But that mainstream was more narrowly defined and looked a lot like Lapid’s own cosmopolitan Tel Aviv bubble. His party had clear sectoral enemies, running explicitly against the financial carve-outs granted to the ultra-Orthodox community and its exemptions from mandatory military service. He also once dismissively [dubbed](#) Israel’s Arab lawmakers “Zoabis,” a reference to one extremist politician, before apologizing.

But with each election, Lapid's definition of the mainstream expanded to more accurately encompass greater swaths of Israeli society. His anti-ultra-Orthodox rhetoric [softened](#). He tried to find common ground with the political right. But nowhere has this evolution been more apparent than in Lapid's outreach to Israel's Arab community.

Last February, in the heat of his election campaign, Lapid held a town-hall meeting over Zoom. The event was pitched toward English-speaking Israelis, but Lapid's most notable pronouncement wasn't directed at them at all. As the *Times of Israel* [reported](#):

It's "right," he said, "for the country to invest in Arab neighborhoods the same money they're investing everywhere else, in housing, in schooling, in the health system. This should be—it's just the right thing to do."

He added: "I travel quite a bit. I'm always a bit ashamed when entering an Arab city or an Arab town in Israel and seeing how the roads shrink and how the infrastructure [worsens]. Civil equality is part of what countries should do. And we don't."

He noted that Israel spends about 25% less on Arab children in school than Jewish ones.

"This is just not right," he said. "You don't get to do this if you consider yourself a just country. We cannot sit in Zichron and look at Fureidis and say [to ourselves], these are second-class citizens. There are no second-class citizens in a country that respects itself."

It's not uncommon for Israeli politicians to talk about the need to better serve the country's Arab citizens. But this claim is usually couched in the language of national self-interest, not Arab rights. As one analyst [wrote](#), "Israeli politicians, especially on the right, often respond to questions about equality with practical arguments. Investment in the Arab community is good for the economy, good for industry, reduces crime—its strongest argument, in other words, is that it's good for everyone else. But Lapid's concern was emphatically about the Arabs themselves."

This framing was not coincidental, and it hinted at Lapid's plan to dramatically transform the landscape of Israeli politics. Months later, when he assembled his anti-Netanyahu coalition, the clincher was the inclusion of Ra'am, an Islamist party, which became the first independent Arab party to serve in an Israeli government. The party's leader, Mansour Abbas, had run on a bold pledge to work with the next Israeli coalition, rather than protest outside it, and Lapid took him up on the offer. Last month, their partnership bore fruit: The coalition [passed](#) the largest funding allocation for Israel's Arab citizens in the country's history.

In August, when Said al-Harumi, a Bedouin Knesset member from Ra'am, died suddenly at the age of 49, Lapid went to the family's mourning tent to eulogize him alongside Abbas. "He fell in battle because he believed in something so much that he exhausted himself for it," Lapid declared. "He worked day and night. He fought for his people, for his family, for his tribe, for the things he believed in."

Turning to Abbas, Lapid added, "We will not forget and we will continue to work together. This is his legacy: that we stand here together today. All of us. You are part of the government, you are partners, you are equal. We learn from you and we will continue

to learn from you. I learned a lot from Said; I learn from you, Mansour; I learn from the community that is sitting here ... We are crying with you and hugging you on this day.”

Lapid’s warm words were [captured on video](#) and earned him the [ire](#) of the Israeli right, which attacked him on social media for valorizing supposed “[terrorism supporters](#).” But he did not apologize. Instead, he did it again. In October, Lapid visited the Bedouin community in Israel’s south alongside Mansour Abbas, and gave the following [speech](#), which he posted to his social-media channels:

This visit is part of a historic step that we are taking, where the government is not some patron that is coming to tell the Bedouin residents of the Negev how they should live. Rather, for the first time in history, there is an Arab party that is part of the leadership of Israel, that is part of the government, and that is an important partner in the government. Thanks to this partnership, in the next few weeks, we will pass the state program for the development of the Arab community, which includes tens of billions of shekels in infrastructure investment that should have been made long ago ...

We will continue to work toward full civil equality for Israel’s Arab citizens and to fix the deep-rooted problems facing the Arab community in Israel.

Israel’s Arabs constitute some 20 percent of the country’s population. Contrary to popular narrative, polls show that many of them [identify](#) with the Israeli state. By any honest definition, they are part of the Israeli mainstream. Yet until now, they have been treated as outsiders by politicians and the popular discourse, and have faced persistent discrimination. Lapid and the government he built are slowly changing that.

“The Arab citizens of Israel are citizens of Israel,” he told me, “and when you are a citizen in a democratic country, you deserve the same rights as everyone else.” To Lapid, unlike his critics on the nationalist right and anti-nationalist left, advocating for Israel’s Arabs does not conflict with his support for Israel’s continued existence as the world’s sole Jewish state. “I’m proud of Israel as a democracy, and I’m proud of Israel as a safe haven and the only country that Jews have on this Earth,” he said. “I totally support civil rights for the Arab citizens of Israel. And part of civil rights is the basic dignity of equal infrastructure, schools, and water, and electricity, and all the things that make life a life. Therefore, without apologizing for it, I support Israel investing more in its Arab citizens.”

“It kind of amazes me that there is even a question mark on this,” he added. “These are the basic things that Israel needs to do and wants to do, and therefore it’s part of the policy I’m pushing in this government.”

Our conversation focused on Israel’s internal challenges, from democratic erosion to [extremist Jewish violence](#) to Arab inequality. But it’s not hard to see how Lapid’s positions on these topics underlie his outlook toward Israel’s external challenges, including its conflict with the Palestinians. He has always supported a two-state solution that would end Israel’s occupation of the West Bank, [saying](#) that Israel and the Palestinians did not need “a happy marriage,” but rather “a divorce we can live with.” Given the fractured nature of both groups’ political leadership, Lapid sees little hope in the near term for realizing this vision today. But he likely believes that an Israel more at peace with itself—and particularly with the Palestinian citizens inside it—would be better positioned to make peace with those Palestinians outside.

“It is not authentic to be an extremist.” That’s what Lapid [told me](#) shortly after he became Israel’s opposition leader last year. He has staked his entire political career on this proposition. He insists that violent Arab and Jewish extremists are aberrations who abuse nationalism and faith to justify their anti-social impulses, unlike the Israeli mainstream that he aspires to represent. “That is my lifetime mission as a politician: to unite Israelis who believe in democracy and outreach to people who are different from you,” he said.

It’s a powerful story, and as a former journalist, Lapid is good at telling it. But it’s not Israel’s only story. A few months ago, Bezalel Smotrich, the head of the far-right alliance, got up in the Knesset and said something very different. After being heckled by several Arab Knesset members, he [snapped](#), “I’m not talking to you, anti-Zionists, terror supporters, enemies. You’re here by mistake, because [David] Ben-Gurion,” Israel’s first prime minister, “didn’t finish the job and throw you out in 1948.” This ugly outburst brought to mind a different Knesset riposte by Jamal Zahalka, a member of the hard-line Arab party Balad, in which he turned to his Jewish colleagues in a heated 2015 exchange and declared: “We were here before you, and we’ll be here after you.”

This is the story that many people in Israel tell themselves. It’s a zero-sum struggle in which only one side can win and the other must lose. I recalled these stories to Lapid, and asked whether there was truly an electoral constituency for his alternative narrative. Did enough Israelis really share his story?

“The examples you use are the sharp ends of Israeli extremism,” he replied. “This is not the majority. We are the majority.” He pointed to the current government, with its eight parties—left, right, Jewish, Arab—somehow serving a common cause, as proof.

Unlike the “extreme right” and the “extreme left,” Lapid argued, “I do not and the majority of Israelis do not define ourselves by hating somebody else, but by the proactive, positive ideas that ensure our ability to live together.”

“This is why we formed this government,” he said, adding, “I think we’re going to do better ... and not listening to the extremists is always a very good start.”