



ANALYSIS

Is Israel's Political Virtuoso in Denial?

Benjamin Netanyahu ignores mounting criticism of his closest running mates' agendas at his own peril.

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Itamar Ben-Gvir (C), member of Israel's Knesset (parliament) and head of the far right "Jewish Power" (Otzma Yehudit) party, takes part in a protest outside the District court in Jerusalem on Feb. 27 in support of the officer accused of shooting Iyad Hallak, a disabled Palestinian man who was shot dead by Israeli police in May 2020. AHMAD GHARABLI/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Israel's current election campaign is, at long last, in the home stretch of its four-month run. With Israelis forced finally to decide whom they plan to support on Nov. 1, it appears that one of the remaining few candidates still

unprepared to face reality is opposition leader and ostensible front-runner Benjamin Netanyahu.

Netanyahu's prospects of forming Israel's next government are anchored in, amid other factors, the continued patronage of the ascendant Religious Zionism alliance, which constitutes an integral component of his conservative bloc. Predicted consistently to place as the third-largest faction in the new Knesset, the Religious Zionism alliance—which is not synonymous with the ideology of religious Zionism, many of whose proponents reject the alliance's program—is a likely spoiler to his meticulously constructed plotline.

Headlined by political firebrands Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir, Religious Zionism has set its sights on targets such as overhauling Israel's justice system, whose independence would be drastically curtailed, and deporting Arabs who demonstrate “disloyalty” to the state of Israel. The Religious Zionism juggernaut has not only energized its devoted base, but it has also made inroads among a wider swath of Israel's Jewish electorate, which leans overwhelmingly right and has become disenchanted increasingly with the (relatively) more mainstream Likud party. Palpable excitement has been generated particularly among younger voters.

An amalgamation of three separate slates—Smotrich's National Union-Tkuma Party; Ben-Gvir's Jewish Power (Otzma Yehudit) party; and Noam, a reactionary “family values” list—that was brokered by none other than Netanyahu himself, the Religious Zionism alliance boasts a toxic pedigree. Smotrich, who rose to fame in 2006 when he organized an animal parade as a means to equate a local Pride march with bestiality, has since said Jews are commanded not to sell homes in Israel to Arabs and called to separate Jews and Arabs in hospital maternity wards. Ben-Gvir was a teenage disciple of the Kach movement, which was disqualified for being “manifestly racist” from running for parliament in 1988 and outlawed entirely in 1994.

He has, by his own admission, been prosecuted “more than 53” times and convicted in 15 percent of those cases, including 2007 charges of inciting racism and backing a terrorist group. (In 2020, former Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett rebuffed pressure from Netanyahu to allocate space for Ben-Gvir within the short-lived merger between the New Right, Jewish Home, and National Union parties.) Noam's raison d'être is to bolster Jewish identity through combatting the effects of “postmodern

culture”—a rhetorical placeholder for all concepts that do not dovetail with their fundamentalist outlook.

Alarm bells are sounding loudly—and not only for Religious Zionism’s domestic nemeses on the partisan left, who charge that Smotrich and Ben-Gvir are conspiring to endanger Israel’s democratic principles. “[Ben-Gvir] is not someone we want to see as part of the government,” a Biden administration official told *Israel Hayom*, adding that “it would be a huge problem for us.”

Similar warnings have been issued by stalwart friends of Israel on Capitol Hill, including Sen. Bob Menendez and Rep. Brad Sherman. Jewish communal organs in the United States and Europe have joined the dismayed chorus as well. (Agencies such as the American Jewish Committee and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, which registered sharp disapproval of Ben-Gvir in the past but whose voices are conspicuously silent now, are wary undoubtedly of criticizing an inevitable kingmaker.)

It’s impossible that Netanyahu does not understand his predicament. Hubris notwithstanding, he’s among the most astute observers of popular opinion and political tides in the United States to have filled the prime minister’s chair during my many years working for Israeli leaders.

Netanyahu graduated from public high school in the Philadelphia area, trained as an architect at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and was posted for six years as a senior Israeli diplomat in Washington and then New York; he holds a uniquely insightful perspective of Israel’s foremost strategic ally. Yet, it seems that he’s poised for another clash with the White House on par with his notorious 2015 address to a joint session of Congress and his aborted 2020 annexation bid.

Judging from experience, Netanyahu is deploying a multidimensional strategy. The totality of its elements, he is hoping, will afford him the latitude to embrace the Religious Zionism alliance as a partner and emerge intact from the affair. He’ll be using the same playbook that served him nominally well during his combined 15 years as premier. (I staffed 10 of them.)

At a press conference that he convened following the publication of Menendez’s cautionary remarks—whose contents reportedly “pissed off”

Netanyahu—he deflected and blamed the Americans. “I would have expected them,” he pivoted from Menendez’s counsel, “to warn us of a government that depends on the Muslim Brotherhood who support terrorism and [Arab politicians] Ahmad Tibi and Ayman Odeh.” Never mind Smotrich’s revelation of a failed Netanyahu bid to recruit Arab politician Mansour Abbas’s Ra’am Party—the Muslim Brotherhood affiliate he was referring to—for a Likud-led government last year.

Additionally, external diversions will be provided by competing (and intertwined) theaters, such as China, Ukraine, Iran, and the global energy market—upon all of which the world is focused intently and where Israel’s cooperation is highly sought as a source of intelligence, natural gas, and other critical inputs. The frantic pace of the news cycle, Netanyahu anticipates further, will consume and eclipse any residual outrage over Religious Zionism’s inclusion in his coalition.

Employing the maxim that the best defense is a good offense, Netanyahu will also delegate, as it were, to his Republican allies in Washington, taking advantage of their fierce affinity for Israel and deferring to their expertise in hounding more equivocal Democrats on this hypersensitive wedge issue. (Much of the ferociously right-wing Religious Zionism platform channels GOP ideas comfortably.) I can still recall watching how, back in 1998, Netanyahu wielded the visit of then-U.S. House Speaker Newt Gingrich to Jerusalem as a cudgel to bash the Clinton administration over its efforts to promote a settlement between Israel and the Palestinians.

At home, Netanyahu will continue driving to dominate the Religious Zionism alliance and diminish its profile. With other realistic and viable alternatives in short supply, he will maintain robust coordination with Smotrich and Ben-Gvir while maneuvering to avoid being perceived as their sponsor—for fear of alienating the centrist voters who Netanyahu needs desperately if he hopes to win a majority.

That balancing act was illustrated poignantly on Oct. 17, when he dodged being photographed together with Ben-Gvir at an event they both attended. As captain of Likud, the largest caucus in parliament, Netanyahu expects always to cast a shadow that will obscure all other members of his squad.

In Netanyahu’s mind, the fracas over his collaboration with the Religious Zionist parties is simply a distraction that he cannot permit to deviate his attention from the prize: returning to power and, no less importantly,

leveraging that privileged position to extract himself from the clutches of multiple corruption-related indictments and the credible threat of incarceration.

Finally, after all has been said and done, Netanyahu will resort to disbelief, drawing encouragement from the precedent of Israel's ability to weather such storms in the past and deducing that the country can sustain any fallout from his flirtation with Religious Zionism. He will summon the mantra of an Obama administration spokeswoman who, even during Netanyahu's darkest days of tangling with the president, reassured the world that the bilateral relationship transcends personalities and "is about the strong bonds between the United States and Israel and our people, and our commitment to common interests and values."

The state of play is dynamic, however. Netanyahu, who has been unable to secure a conclusive electoral victory since March 2015, may have met his match this time in a polarization-infected situation that he cannot contain. As a chronically poor manager of personal interactions—a vast number of disgruntled former aides to Netanyahu have been reincarnated as his main political rivals—he could be overestimating his chances of prevailing once again.

Having precluded the possibility of reuniting with Blue and White leader Benny Gantz—those bitter feelings are mutual—Netanyahu is locking himself into the exclusive script of teaming up with the Religious Zionism alliance. If his proclivity during most of my years in the prime minister's office was to be stationed toward the ideological center of the governments he forged, Netanyahu is now positioned ironically to be among the most liberal figures in a Likud-Religious Zionism union with Israel's ultraorthodox contingents. Aside from the damage that this will inflict on his personal brand, it will also enslave him to the demands of his far-right associates.

In Israel's political system, authority devolves counterintuitively to the smaller factions that larger parties—such as Likud—are reliant on when it comes to crafting ruling coalitions. These splinter groupings have their senior colleagues over a barrel, able to perpetually quit and precipitate a collapse of government should their terms, no matter how idiosyncratic, not be met.

The Religious Zionism cohort is unlikely to have pity on Netanyahu. In 2013, when he was compelled to join forces with Bennett and then-finance minister Yair Lapid, Netanyahu was able to dissuade them from insisting on deputy premier titles. Smotrich and Ben-Gvir are cut from very different cloth. (Smotrich, who has developed a taste for trash talking Netanyahu, is adamant that Ben-Gvir will be a “senior minister” in any Netanyahu cabinet; Ben-Gvir is demanding an enhanced public security portfolio, with responsibility for Israel’s police forces.)

Going to the boards will be a win-win proposition for them: They will either have their most extreme policy objectives served or be able to claim that their pure intentions were foiled by Netanyahu, thus increasing their cachet in the eyes of their constituency.

Under these circumstances, Netanyahu will have a difficult time changing the subject, as he attempted unconvincingly with Menendez. Many countries in a now emboldened, multitasking world—with which Israel has myriad ties—will be disinclined to give Israel a pass for what they would consider unacceptably bad behavior. That threat could extend to the signatories of the Abraham Accords, the regional normalization deal that Netanyahu shepherded and he takes immense pride in; Emirati leaders may already have expressed their displeasure about the Religious Zionism alliance.

Washington’s appetite for partnering with Israel would also move closer toward irreparable harm. In his new autobiography, Netanyahu quotes U.S. President Joe Biden telling him during the May 2021 Gaza conflict that he was “getting squeezed here to put an end to this as soon as possible.” Indeed, as Biden also reflected during that conversation, “this is not Scoop Jackson’s Democratic Party,” which held much more favorable views of Israel.

The progressive wing of Biden’s caucus will have a field day with Smotrich and Ben-Gvir, turning up the heat on Israel in both the U.S. Congress and the Biden administration. It’s far from certain that a GOP led by former U.S. President Donald Trump—whose sympathy for Netanyahu has been erratic—would provide enough cover to stanch the bleeding.

Netanyahu might yet be spared this predicament. Even more likely than this bleak scenario materializing is the correspondingly precarious outcome of Israelis being dragged to another sixth ballot in a few months’ time. That

could be a saving grace for both him and Israel, sparing them the fate of a zealot-controlled government that could become a pariah among their erstwhile friends.