

## ISSUE BRIEF

## Doing It His Way

### How Naftali Bennett Could Beat the Odds and Wind Up Transforming Israel

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Israel is in the throes of growing pains. After the uninterrupted, twelve-year reign of Benjamin Netanyahu—whom many Israelis considered irreplaceable as the country’s prime minister, and some still do—Israelis have a new chief. Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, virtually unknown on the global stage, is moving through this uncharted territory ambitiously.

At the head of an unlikely cohort of ideological opposites, emerging from the crucible of four rapid-fire Israeli elections in less than two years, Bennett is showing signs of metamorphosis from impetuous upstart to mature statesman.<sup>1</sup> He has not balked at his responsibility to reform inequitable dynamics within Israeli society, even when it has meant being ostracized by his own community. The country’s exclusively Orthodox parties have resolutely condemned Bennett—himself a Modern Orthodox Jew with a trademark, tiny *kippah* affixed to the back of his balding scalp—for leading what they deem to be a rabidly antireligious coalition.<sup>2</sup> And, he has marshalled a concerted effort to repair Israel’s damaged relationships abroad, conferring eagerly with presidents and premiers in the Middle East and beyond.<sup>3</sup>

Bennett and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid—Israel’s alternate prime minister, who is slated to rotate with Bennett in August 2023—have crafted a government whose impact was predicted to be merely transactional. Its goals are limited and confined explicitly to areas of broad consensus among

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- 1 Ben Caspit, “Can Lapid-Bennett Coalition Keep It Together?” *Al-Monitor*, June 11, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/06/can-lapid-bennett-coalition-keep-it-together>; Adam Rasgon, “Israel Has Its 4th National Election in 2 Years. Here’s Why,” *New York Times*, March 17, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/17/world/middleeast/israeli-election.html>.
- 2 Jeremy Sharon, “Bennett Is an ‘Evil’ and ‘Wicked’ Reform Jew Who Will Rot, Say Haredi MKs,” *Jerusalem Post*, June 8, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/shas-leader-arye-deri-warns-new-govt-will-destroy-jewish-state-670421>.
- 3 “Bennett Met Secretly Last Week with Jordan’s King Abdullah in Amman,” *Times of Israel*, July 8, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/bennett-met-secretly-with-jordans-king-abdullah-in-amman-reports/>; Aaron Boxerman and Lazar Berman, “Bennett, After Meeting Egypt’s Sissi: ‘We Laid the Foundation for Deep Ties,’” *Times of Israel*, September 13, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/bennett-after-meeting-egypts-sissi-we-laid-the-foundation-for-deep-ties/>; Lahav Harkov, “COP26: Iran at the Fore in Bennett’s Meetings at Climate Conference,” *Jerusalem Post*, November 2, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/cop26-iran-at-the-fore-in-bennetts-meetings-at-climate-conference-683748>.

disparate components of the new parliamentary majority.<sup>4</sup> But, after six months in office, Team Bennett-Lapid is exhibiting unexpected traces of transformative potential to ameliorate Israel's domestic politics and foreign relations.

## A House Divided

Naftali Bennett, an astute entrepreneur who has banked millions from the sale of multiple technology startups, first entered the Knesset in 2013 as the leader of a religious nationalist faction that he took by storm.<sup>5</sup> Under his stewardship, Jewish Home increased its market share in that year's elections by 400 percent, capturing twelve seats among the legislature's one hundred and twenty members. The political fortunes of a resilient Bennett would ebb and flow. After his breakaway New Right party failed to cross the electoral threshold in April 2019, Bennett was returned to the Knesset in the same year's September vote—he placed second to current Interior Minister Ayelet Shaked on their now-rebranded list, Yamina—rocketing upward to become Israel's defense minister that November. That his tumultuous ride would culminate in the premiership was improbable.

Going into the March 2021 ballot, Bennett staked a conditional claim to the Prime Minister's Office. "If I make it to 15 Knesset seats," the dark horse candidate vowed, "I will be prime minister."<sup>6</sup> He fell short of that target, capturing only seven. Things would get progressively worse for Bennett when dissent broke out within his ranks.<sup>7</sup> Some of his caucus colleagues either resigned or went rogue. Miraculously for Bennett, however, the hung jury of Israel's electorate created space for a kingmaker. Ever the nimble businessman, he capitalized shrewdly

on the opportunity, sliding into the top slot of a tenuous alliance between parties united almost solely by their palpable loathing of the incumbent Netanyahu.

The transition has not been smooth. Bennett, who parlayed his underdog status masterfully into fetching the executive suite for himself, has been skewered by his adversaries for presuming to seize command from his lesser perch as chairman of one of the Knesset's smaller splinter groupings.<sup>8</sup> In fact, this precedent may have let a dubious genie out of the bottle, with the path now clear for other aspirants to ostensibly contravene the *vox populi* and demand premier billing despite a poor showing at the polls. Here, too, Bennett has broken new (albeit hazardous) ground.

Lacking an independent power base, Bennett has little wiggle room. Many of his supporters bolted over their disappointment with his backpedaling on campaign promises; Bennett parried that he was giving precedence to his parallel guarantee to prevent another repeat election.<sup>9</sup> Disenfranchising a single sponsor of his ruling coalition could mean sudden defeat in a non-confidence motion—Lapid illustrated this predicament when he cautioned in September that reopening the US consulate in Jerusalem "might destabilize this government"—though a full sixty-one of one hundred and twenty Knesset members would need to rally behind a particular substitute in order to actually oust Bennett.<sup>10</sup>

4 "Basic Guidelines for the Establishment of a Unity Government During the Tenure of the 24th Knesset," Knesset, <https://m.knesset.gov.il/mk/government/documents/CA36-KaveiYesod.pdf>; Raoul Wootliff, "At First Cabinet Meeting, Bennett, Lapid Vow to Work to Make New Government Last," *Times of Israel*, June 14, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/at-first-cabinet-meeting-bennett-lapid-vow-to-work-to-make-new-government-last/>.

5 Elihay Vidal, "Israel PM Bennett Nets Millions from Payoneer SPAC Offering," *Calcalist*, June 24, 2021, <https://www.calcalistech.com/ctech/articles/0,7340,L-3909653,00.html>.

6 Yehuda Shlezinger, "Naftali Bennett Confident He Will Be Israel's Next PM," *Israel Hayom*, March 4, 2021, <https://www.israelhayom.com/2021/03/04/naftali-bennett-is-confident-he-will-be-israels-next-pm/>.

7 Gil Hoffman, "Yamina MK to Quit Party in Protest of Bennett-Lapid Unity Talks," *Jerusalem Post*, May 5, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-elections/yamina-mk-wont-back-bennett-lapid-unity-government-667254>.

8 "Current Knesset Members of the Twenty-Fourth Knesset," Knesset, [https://www.knesset.gov.il/mk/eng/MKIndex\\_Current\\_eng.asp?view=1](https://www.knesset.gov.il/mk/eng/MKIndex_Current_eng.asp?view=1).

9 Ofer Aderet, "'We'll Never Support Lapid' and Other Promises Bennett's About to Break in Coalition Talks," *Haaretz*, June 1, 2021, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/elections/.premium-we-ll-never-support-lapid-and-other-promises-bennett-s-about-to-break-1.9864908>; "Bennett Declares He's Working to Form Gov't with Lapid: It's Unity or Elections," *Times of Israel*, May 30, 2021, [https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog\\_entry/bennett-declares-hes-working-to-form-govt-with-lapid-says-netanyahu-has-no-options-for-coalition/](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/bennett-declares-hes-working-to-form-govt-with-lapid-says-netanyahu-has-no-options-for-coalition/).

10 Richard Pérez-Peña, "Israel's Parliament Approves New Government, Ousting Netanyahu," *New York Times*, August 27, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/06/13/world/israel-knesset-bennett-lapid-netanyahu#knesset-vote-netanyahu-bennett>; Jonathan Lis, "Lapid Says Biden Plan to Reopen Jerusalem Consulate for Palestinians a 'Bad Idea,'" *Haaretz*, September 1, 2021, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/lapid-says-biden-plan-to-reopen-jerusalem-consulate-for-palestinians-a-bad-idea-1.10172460>; Ben Caspit, "Budget Approval Marks Great Achievement for Israeli Leadership," *Al-Monitor*, November 5, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/11/budget-approval-marks-great-achievement-israeli-leadership>.

## Big-Tent Government

On the flipside—and notwithstanding the shrieks of despair emanating from the Likud and its opposition satellites—the Bennett-led “change bloc” has recalibrated Israel’s profile and trajectory in fundamental ways, both internally and externally.<sup>11</sup>

The Bennett cabinet is arguably the most inclusive in Israel’s history, comprising bona fide conservative, centrist, and liberal elements, and including ministers from the country’s secular, religious, and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) communities.<sup>12</sup> In purposefully integrating viewpoints from the political periphery into the mainstream, alongside more familiar stalwarts of authority, the new government has been a game changer. It belies the accusations of detractors who assert that it is entitled to speak for only a minority of Israelis.

Among the newer faces around the table are members of the progressive Meretz party, now given an opportunity to advance their priorities from inside the cabinet after two decades in opposition. The new coalition also features the United Arab List (UAL), marking the first time that an Arab faction has ever enjoyed this station and its attendant prerogatives—such as a landmark \$9.4-billion stimulus package for “closing gaps in the Arab sector”—to promote the welfare of its constituents.<sup>13</sup> UAL head Mansour Abbas, writing the testimonial that accompanied Bennett’s placement on *Time*’s “100 Most Influential People of 2021,” commended the prime minister’s courage for “[throwing] himself into a political firestorm in order to forge previously unimaginable ties between Israel’s left and right, Arabs and Jews, religious and secular.”<sup>14</sup>

Revolutions in democracy come at a price, and the stability of this unnatural amalgamation of polar opposites pulling in different policy directions is challenged regularly. But, for as long as this government should survive, its fragility will continue to act as an inherent bulwark against adventurism—on the right or the left—and a catalyst for meaningful compromise, with the burden of governance being shouldered widely. The tentative success of this model has already inspired others. “Bennett leads one of the most diverse coalitions in Israeli history,” a senior Joseph Biden administration official said in August, previewing Bennett’s White House debut shortly thereafter.<sup>15</sup> “We think it’s truly remarkable at a time when, as the President often says, we’re demonstrating that democracies can deliver for their people. That’s something we think his government is truly doing, and showing that people with divergent backgrounds and views can come together to solve big problems.”

Circumstances have compelled Bennett to sidestep highly controversial issues, but his full docket of comparatively lower-hanging fruit is moving forward apace. A commitment to greater professionalism and accountability was evidenced in the immediate shuttering of five superfluous ministries, which were invented earlier for patronage purposes and created gross operational inefficiencies.<sup>16</sup> In a radical departure from the divide-and-conquer approach of his predecessor, Bennett has mobilized to remove vitriol and backstabbing from the equation, undertaking to speak with each of his ministers individually on a weekly basis and offering public praise for their efforts, thereby animating teamwork.<sup>17</sup> Also unlike Netanyahu, he has hustled to maintain a schedule of punctual cabinet meetings for debate and decision

- 11 “Israel: Shas, United Torah Judaism Pledge Support for Netanyahu,” i24News, February 24, 2021, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/politics/1614154145-israel-shas-united-torah-judaism-pledge-support-for-netanyahu>; “Bennett to Meet with ‘Change Bloc’ Coalition Leaders before Swearing-in Ceremony,” *Times of Israel*, June 12, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog-june-12-2021/>.
- 12 Patrick Kingsley, “Wide-Ranging Israel Coalition Reaches Deal to Form Government,” *New York Times*, June 2, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/06/02/world/israel-government-netanyahu-bennett#coalition-talks-bennett-lapid>.
- 13 Isabel Kershner, “The Arab Party Raam Makes History within Coalition,” *New York Times*, June 2, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/02/world/middleeast/arab-party-raam-coalition.html>; “Cabinet Approves Approximately NIS 30 Billion Economic Plan to Close Gaps in Arab Society,” Prime Minister’s Office, September 10, 2021, [https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/spoke\\_plan241021](https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/spoke_plan241021).
- 14 Mansour Abbas, “The 100 Most Influential People of 2021: Naftali Bennett,” *Time*, September 14, 2021, <https://time.com/collection/100-most-influential-people-2021/6096021/naftali-bennett/>.
- 15 “Background Press Call by Senior Administration Officials on President Biden’s Official Working Visit with Prime Minister Bennett of the State of Israel,” White House, August 24, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2021/08/25/background-press-call-by-senior-administration-officials-on-president-bidens-official-working-visit-with-prime-minister-bennett-of-the-state-of-israel/>.
- 16 “Government Approves Closure of Five Ministries,” *Jerusalem Post*, July 19, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/government-approves-closure-of-five-ministries-674303>.
- 17 Josef Federman, “Israel’s Netanyahu Lashes Out as End of His Era Draws Near,” Associated Press, June 11, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-joe-biden-israel-middle-east-government-and-politics-9785d2410bf55bce06b893b19b3e6234>; Dov Lieber and Rory Jones, “Israel’s Bennett Seeks New Political Order. Netanyahu Stands in the Way,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 25, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/israel-bennett-netanyahu-biden-coalition-jerusalem-palestinians-11629903262>.

regarding critical matters.<sup>18</sup> And, he has not hesitated to appoint qualified experts—as opposed to personal loyalists—to sensitive senior positions. The nomination of Michael Herzog, a former Israel Defense Forces (IDF) brigadier general and long-term peace negotiator, to serve as Israel’s ambassador to the United States was welcomed by a varied chorus, whose numbers counted former Prime Ministers (and frenemies) Netanyahu and Ehud Barak.<sup>19</sup>

Not only has Bennett transformed the manner in which official business is conducted, but he has also tackled its actual substance, putting government to work in key areas in which there had been rampant stagnation. On November 4, lawmakers passed the country’s first budget proposal in more than three years, a milestone that laid the foundation for strategic planning that had been undermined by the absence of a genuine spending framework.<sup>20</sup> On the COVID-19 front, Bennett’s ministers authorized, and then administered, third vaccine shots to combat the spread of the deadly virus across Israel.<sup>21</sup> Infection rates have plummeted, with the quantity of serious cases declining steadily and additional lockdowns—which would have hampered the national economy, prevented September’s start of the new school year, and cast a cloud over the season’s Jewish holidays—thus far avoided.<sup>22</sup> A November vaccination drive tailored to children between the ages of five and eleven was geared to offset that month’s slight uptick in the disease’s reproduction rate.<sup>23</sup>

On the other end of the spectrum, more focused initiatives are addressing the specialized concerns of particular demographics. August witnessed the launch of a probe—which presented its interim findings on November 22—into Israel’s largest-ever civilian disaster, when forty-five Ultra-Orthodox Jews were killed during a religious commemoration in April; the previous government dragged its feet intentionally, evading calls to establish a commission of inquiry into the tragedy.<sup>24</sup> All restrictions on blood donations from homosexual men were lifted this past summer as well.<sup>25</sup> A sweeping overhaul of the *kashrut*-supervision industry is set to abolish the monopoly of the Chief Rabbinate over the certification process.<sup>26</sup> And, in late October, just prior to the United Nations (UN) Climate Change Summit, Israel approved a new target of zero net carbon emissions by 2050.<sup>27</sup> Taken together with other structural reforms incorporated into Israel’s new budget, these measures mark a pronounced sea change toward greater attentiveness and proficiency in Israel’s bureaucracy and greater equality in Israel’s civic space, which could outlast Bennett’s tenure.<sup>28</sup>

## All the World’s a Stage

Israel’s international posture is in the midst of a significant transition as well, with Bennett and his associates toiling to rebuild bridges to foreign leaders snubbed by Netanyahu. While some policies of the Bennett government—tethered to an electorate that has trended increasingly rightward—unsurprisingly resemble those of its forerunner, their context is decidedly different.

18 Ariel Kahana, “It Will Be Easier for Our Government to Work with the Current US Administration,” *Israel Hayom*, July 13 2021, <https://www.israelhayom.com/2021/07/13/it-will-be-easier-for-our-government-to-work-with-the-current-us-administration/>.

19 Greer Fay Cashman, “Grapevine September 15, 2021: The Other Herzog,” *Jerusalem Post*, September 14, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/grapevine-september-15-2021-the-other-herzog-679499>.

20 Gil Hoffman, “Israeli Election Avoided as State Budget Passes Into Law, After 3.5 Years” *Jerusalem Post*, November 4, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/israel-passes-first-budget-in-35-years-683981>.

21 Maayan Lubell, “PM Has Third COVID-19 Shot as Israel Extends Booster Campaign,” Reuters, August 20, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/pm-has-third-covid-19-shot-israel-extends-booster-campaign-2021-08-20/>.

22 קורונה - לוח בקרה, <https://datadashboard.health.gov.il/COVID-19/general/>; “Israel Booster Jabs Cutting Severe Covid Even as Cases Surge: Experts,” France 24, September 15, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210915-israel-booster-jabs-cutting-severe-covid-even-as-cases-surge-experts>.

23 Jonathan Lis and Ido Efrati, “PM Bennett Dubs Renewed COVID Spread the ‘Children’s Wave,’” *Haaretz*, November 20, 2021, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/pm-bennett-dubs-renewed-covid-spread-the-children-s-wave-1.10402419>.

24 Ilan Ben Zion, “Israeli Probe into Deadly Holy Site Stampede Opens Hearings,” Associated Press, August 22, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/lifestyle-middle-east-israel-a6dc09da66edacc91594813796563515>; “Commission of Inquiry Submits Interim Report on Deadly Crush at Religious Festival,” *Times of Israel*, November 23, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/commission-of-inquiry-submits-interim-report-on-deadly-crush-at-religious-festival/>.

25 Amy Spiro, “Health Minister Announces Removal of All Blood Donation Restrictions for Gay Men,” *Times of Israel*, August 19, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/health-minister-announces-removal-of-all-blood-donation-restrictions-for-gay-men/>.

26 Jeremy Sharon, “Kashrut Reforms to Abolish Chief Rabbinate Kashrut Monopoly,” *Jerusalem Post*, July 20, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/religious-services-minister-announces-far-reaching-kashrut-reforms-674416>.

27 Tovah Lazaroff and Tzvi Joffe, “COP26: Israel to Hit Zero Net Emissions by 2050, Bennett Pledges,” *Jerusalem Post*, October 30, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/climate-change/cop26-israel-to-aim-for-zero-net-emissions-by-2050-683470>.

28 Ricky Ben-David, “How Much of a Revolution? 13 Key Reforms in Israel’s New State Budget,” *Times of Israel*, November 4, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/how-much-of-a-revolution-13-key-plans-in-israels-new-state-budget/>.

The prime minister's address to the United Nations General Assembly in September gave expression to a reoriented narrative. Consciously circumventing the classic rhetoric of impending doom that his predecessor was wont to reference liberally—replete with Holocaust imagery—Bennett opted instead to strike an optimistic chord, highlighting themes such as Israel's "desire to contribute to the world" and its ability to conduct "debate without hate."<sup>29</sup> In a subsequent talk to representatives of the US Jewish community, he extended a hand of reciprocity, intimating that Israel had much to learn from Jews in the United States.<sup>30</sup>

Proof of this novel paradigm is evident in the Bennett government's interactions with its counterparts. Speaking at Ben Gurion International Airport just before departing to meet President Joe Biden in Washington, Bennett proclaimed on August 24 that he was "bringing with me from Jerusalem a new spirit of cooperation, which rests on the special and long-standing connection between the two countries."<sup>31</sup> After a one-day delay in their rendezvous—which was postponed when Bennett, demonstrating his friendship for the United States, took a back seat while Biden dealt with the aftermath of terrorist bombings in Kabul—the two principals underscored their determination to work together.<sup>32</sup> The prime minister emphasized the need to bolster bipartisanship in the conversation between Israel and the United States.<sup>33</sup>

Bennett's words offered a sharp contrast to those of Netanyahu, who struggled even to congratulate Biden, the leader of Israel's foremost ally, after his electoral victory against Donald Trump.<sup>34</sup> Netanyahu's scorched-earth strategy included harsh parting words for Biden. "The administration in Washington asked me not to discuss our disagreement on Iran publicly," the outgoing premier told the Knesset, "but with all due respect, I can't do that."<sup>35</sup> While Netanyahu and his fellow travelers have branded Bennett weak and willing to subcontract Israel's core interests to the United States, the sitting prime minister has prudently chosen to be a team player, in the knowledge that Israel, no matter how the Iranian nuclear standoff plays out, will hope to remain a beneficiary of vital US support.<sup>36</sup> Bennett leveraged his rapport with the White House to mitigate dissatisfaction with Israeli measures to outlaw six Palestinian civil-society organizations and to commence settlement construction; Netanyahu would have had scant luck on this score.<sup>37</sup>

Inroads have also been made to Europe. Addressing the Foreign Affairs Council of the European Union (EU) in July, Foreign Minister Lapid pushed for jumpstarting the dormant Association Council for high-level EU-Israel consultations.<sup>38</sup> The Netanyahu government suspended Israel's participation in the forum in 2013 after new EU directives restricted the dealings of its members with Israeli entities beyond the Green Line; discussions on Israel's reinstatement in 2020 never crossed the finish line.<sup>39</sup> Lapid's trip to Brussels was "an opportunity for a

29 "Address by PM Netanyahu to the UN General Assembly," Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, September 24, 2009, [https://mfa.gov.il/mfa/internationalorgs/speeches/pages/address\\_pm\\_netanyahu\\_un\\_general\\_assembly\\_24-sep-2009.aspx](https://mfa.gov.il/mfa/internationalorgs/speeches/pages/address_pm_netanyahu_un_general_assembly_24-sep-2009.aspx); "Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's Address to the United Nations General Assembly in New York," Prime Minister's Office, September 27, 2021, [https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/event\\_un270921](https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/event_un270921).

30 Ben Sales, "Israeli PM Naftali Bennett to American Jewish Leaders: 'We Have to Redesign Our Relationship,'" Jewish Telegraphic Agency, September 27, 2021, <https://www.jta.org/2021/09/27/israel/israeli-pm-naftali-bennett-to-american-jewish-leaders-we-have-to-redesign-our-relationship>.

31 "PM Bennett Leaves on his First Diplomatic Visit to Washington," Prime Minister's Office, August 24, 2021, [https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/event\\_washington230821](https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/event_washington230821).

32 Prime Minister of Israel (@IsraeliPM), "President Biden thanked Prime Minister Bennett for his understanding regarding the change in time of their meeting in light of events in Afghanistan and added that he is looking forward to their meeting which will be held later today," Twitter, August 26, 2021, 11:20 p.m., <https://twitter.com/israelipm/status/1431094223265308679>.

33 "PM Bennett Meets with US President Joe Biden," Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, August 28, 2021, <https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2021/Pages/PM-Bennett-meets-with-US-President-Joe-Biden-27-August-2021.aspx>.

34 Raphael Ahren, "After Hours of Silence, Netanyahu Congratulates Biden, but Doesn't Say What For," *Times of Israel*, November 8, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/after-hours-of-silence-netanyahu-and-rivlin-congratulate-biden-on-election-win/>.

35 Lahav Harkov, "Netanyahu Picks Fight with Biden in Final Speech as Prime Minister," *Jerusalem Post*, June 13, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/politics-and-diplomacy/netanyahu-picks-fight-with-biden-in-final-speech-as-prime-minister-670929>.

36 Barak Ravid, "Netanyahu Claims His Successor-in-Waiting Won't Stand Up to Biden," *Axios*, June 3, 2021, <https://www.axios.com/netanyahu-claims-bennett-not-tough-biden-865a5997-b571-4855-b422-c47bc86adcb3.html>.

37 Michael Starr, et al., "US Slams Israel for Declaring Palestinian NGOs Arms of Terror Group," *Jerusalem Post*, October 24, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/palestinian-ngos-declared-pfllp-terrorist-arms-by-israeli-government-682826>.

38 Lazar Berman, "In Meetings with Lapid, EU Expresses Eagerness to Improve Israel Ties," *Times of Israel*, July 13, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-meetings-with-lapid-eu-expressed-eagerness-to-improve-israel-ties-sources/>.

39 Noa Landau, "With Annexation Suspended, EU States Propose Reinstating Israel Association Council After Eight Years," *Haaretz*, August 28, 2020, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-with-annexation-suspended-eu-proposal-to-reinstate-high-profile-forum-after-8-years-1.9109486>.





Israel's Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, U.S. President Joe Biden and Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson chat as they attend an evening reception to mark the opening day of the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26), in Glasgow, Scotland, Britain November 1, 2021. Alberto Pezzali/Pool via REUTERS

fresh start, for restarting the relationship with Israel from the point of view of our bilateral relations,” EU foreign policy czar Josep Borrell declared.<sup>40</sup> That same message was conveyed from Stockholm in October, when Israel received the first Swedish foreign minister to come calling in more than a decade.<sup>41</sup> On December 6, Israel joined Horizon Europe, the EU's \$100 billion research framework.<sup>42</sup> Disputes linger, but Israel is broadcasting a modified and more constructive tone than Netanyahu's

refrain about the European Union's “hypocritical and hostile stance” toward Israel.<sup>43</sup>

Closer to home, Bennett has extended a renewed olive branch to Israel's neighbors. Visiting Jordan—with which Israel shares its longest border—he logged King Abdullah II's first meeting with an Israeli prime minister since 2018, also agreeing that Israel would increase the quantity of water that it sells to the Hashemite Kingdom.<sup>44</sup> A second deal, entailing the export of solar energy from Jordan to

40 “Foreign Affairs Council: Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell Upon Arrival,” European External Action Service, July 12, 2021, [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/101613/foreign-affairs-council-remarks-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-upon-arrival\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/101613/foreign-affairs-council-remarks-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-upon-arrival_en).

41 Ann Linde (@AnnLinde), “Just arrived in Israel. This official visit marks a new beginning in the relationship between Israel and Sweden. Will be meeting with foreign minister @yairlapid and president Isaac Herzog. This will be the first visit by a Swedish foreign minister to Israel in ten years,” Twitter, October 17, 2021, 11:03 a.m., <https://twitter.com/AnnLinde/status/1449752895931490310>.

42 “Israel joins Horizon Europe research and innovation programme,” European Commission, December 6, 2021, [https://ec.europa.eu/info/news/israel-joins-horizon-europe-research-and-innovation-programme-2021-dec-06\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/news/israel-joins-horizon-europe-research-and-innovation-programme-2021-dec-06_en).

43 “Netanyahu Urges EU to End Its ‘Hypocritical and Hostile Stance’ toward Israel,” *Times of Israel*, November 1, 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-urges-eu-to-end-its-hypocritical-and-hostile-stance-toward-israel/>.

44 “Jordan's King Abdullah II Confirms He Met with Gantz, Bennett,” *Jerusalem Post*, July 26, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/jordans-king-abdullah-ii-confirms-he-met-with-gantz-bennett-674877>; Rina Bassist, “Israel's Bennett, Jordan's King Meet Secretly, Make Water Deal,” *Al-Monitor*, July 8, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/07/israels-bennett-jordans-king-meet-secretly-make-water-deal#ixzz7C5HzSugh>.

Israel in return for the provision of an additional quantity of desalinated water, was inked in November.<sup>45</sup> The king—who, according to a *Washington Post* disclosure in June, believes that Netanyahu, Donald Trump, and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman were conspiring to displace him from his custodial role at Jerusalem's al-Aqsa Mosque—acknowledged in July that there is “better understanding between Israel and Jordan” since his direct encounters with Bennett and Defense Minister Benny Gantz.<sup>46</sup>

Relations between Israel and Egypt received a similar upgrade when Bennett called on Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi in Sharm el-Sheikh on September 13. Paying the first public visit of an Israeli premier to Egypt since January 2011, Bennett was given the royal treatment, met at the airport by Sisi's foreign and intelligence ministers, received with Israel's national flag—always absent when Netanyahu was hosted by Sisi and his antecedent, Hosni Mubarak—in prominent view and given front-page attention in the Egyptian media.<sup>47</sup> Under pressure from Washington to improve its human-rights record, Cairo has every intention of showcasing its new beginning with Jerusalem as an effective means to deflect attention to more encouraging horizons.<sup>48</sup>

There has even been a thaw in the largely frozen discourse between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA). Bennett gave his blessing for Benny Gantz to convene, just hours after the prime minister arrived

home from the United States, with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in Ramallah and offer a set of gestures—including a streamlined application process for Israeli licenses, an increased number of working permits issued to Palestinians, and wider approval for Palestinian construction in areas under Israeli control—designed to strengthen dismal ties between Israel and the PA.<sup>49</sup> Other Israeli ministers have since met with Abbas as well.<sup>50</sup> On Gaza, Bennett signed off on a new disbursement mechanism to enable the transfer of Qatari aid without recourse to “suitcases of cash” that have been prone to falling into the hands of those launching attacks against Israel.<sup>51</sup> And, on September 12, Lapid proposed a comprehensive two-stage program to rehabilitate the entire Gaza Strip.<sup>52</sup> With the parties lacking the requisite trust and bandwidth to sustain any full-fledged negotiation, measures like these preserve a genuine chance of future progress.

Reality on the ground has generated nominal agreement on what is—and is not—possible in the interim, with Bennett's personal distaste for a two-state solution with the Palestinians finding a balance with the enthusiasm of those who favor precisely such a result.<sup>53</sup> One member of a delegation of US Senate Democrats who returned from the region in September complimented the pragmatism of Israel's leaders for being “very willing to try to work... towards, at the very least, a meaningful dialogue with the Palestinians.”<sup>54</sup> Secretary of State Antony Blinken endorsed this temperate approach as well. “President

45 Sharon Udasin, “Israel, Jordan, UAE Sign Pivotal Deal to Swap Solar Energy, Desalinated Water,” *Hill*, November, 23, 2021, <https://thehill.com/policy/equilibrium-sustainability/582750-israel-jordan-uae-sign-pivotal-deal-to-swap-solar-energy>.

46 David Ignatius, “Opinion: Inside the Palace Intrigue in Jordan and a Thwarted ‘Deal of the Century,’” *Washington Post*, June 11, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/06/11/jordan-saudi-trump-netanyahu-deal/>; “Interview with King Abdullah II of Jordan; The Latest on COVID, the Delta Variant and How the World Is Handling the Pandemic,” CNN, July 25, 2021, <http://edition.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/2107/25/fzgps.01.html>.

47 “Sisi Discusses Middle East Peace Process with Israeli PM Bennett in Sharm El-Sheikh,” *Ahram Online*, September 13, 2021, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/422996/Egypt/Politics/-Sisi-discusses-Middle-East-peace-process-with-Isra.aspx>; Barak Ravid, “Leaders of Egypt and Israel Hold Rare Public Meeting,” *Axios*, September 13, 2021, <https://www.axios.com/sisi-bennett-meeting-egypt-israel-17b824c9-1a21-4d97-a901-8888ad7a3e4a.html>.

48 Humeira Pamuk, “U.S. to Hold \$130 Mln of Egypt's Military Aid over Human Rights -State Dept,” Reuters, September 15, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-hold-130m-egypts-military-aid-over-human-rights-sources-2021-09-14/>.

49 Anna Ahronheim, Tovah Lazaroff, and Lahav Harkov, “Gantz Offers Abbas Series of Goodwill Gestures in Rare Ramallah Meeting,” *Jerusalem Post*, August 30, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/gantz-meets-abu-mazen-in-ramallah-after-bennett-biden-meet-678070>.

50 Aaron Boxerman, “Meretz Ministers Meet Mahmoud Abbas in Ramallah Next Week,” *Times of Israel*, September 30, 2021, [https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog\\_entry/meretz-ministers-to-meet-mahmoud-abbas-in-ramallah-next-week/](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/meretz-ministers-to-meet-mahmoud-abbas-in-ramallah-next-week/).

51 “Qatar Resumes Aid to Gaza, Minus the Suitcases of Cash,” Associated Press, September 15, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-business-israel-qatar-gaza-strip-2b8810b41815e9a9792749058b4db652>; Almog Ben Zikri and Yaniv Kubovich, “Israel Strikes Hamas Targets after Third Straight Night of Rockets from Gaza,” *Haaretz*, September 12, 2021, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-gaza-rocket-intercepted-over-southen-israel-for-third-consecutive-night-1.10203376>.

52 Aaron Boxerman, “Lapid Proposes ‘New Vision’ for Gaza, Promises Economic Steps for Hamas Quiet,” *Times of Israel*, September 12, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/lapid-proposes-new-vision-for-gaza-promises-economic-steps-for-hamas-quiet/>.

53 Lahav Harkov, “Bennett to Americans: We Want Stability, but Not Two States,” *Jerusalem Post*, August 25, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/international/bennett-to-americans-we-want-stability-but-not-two-states-677709>.

54 Marc Rod, “Senate Democrats Offer Positive Outlook on Major Middle East Challenges Following Trip to Region,” *Jewish Insider*, September 13, 2021, <https://jewishinsider.com/2021/09/senate-democrats-offer-positive-outlook-on-major-middle-east-challenges-following-trip-to-region/>.

Biden's been very clear that he remains committed to a two-state solution," Blinken explained, "but that, I don't think, is something necessarily for today. We have to start putting in place the conditions that would allow both sides to engage in a meaningful and positive way toward two states."<sup>55</sup>

The prime minister's restorative advances have not come at the expense of relationships that flourished under previous Israeli management. In October, Bennett was welcomed warmly in Sochi by Russian President Vladimir Putin, who sat with him for three hours longer than scheduled and invited him to a follow-up session in St. Petersburg.<sup>56</sup> The prime minister has pledged to continue implementing and expanding the circle of the US-brokered Abraham Accords, which heralded the formal normalization of Israel's interactions with the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—whose Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan rolled out the red carpet for Bennett in Abu Dhabi on December 12—and Bahrain.<sup>57</sup> No less significantly, Israel, the UAE, and the United States inaugurated a new economic forum together with India, whose external-affairs minister celebrated the venture from Jerusalem.<sup>58</sup>

Bennett has also recruited Israel's presidency as a force multiplier. While Netanyahu feuded bitterly and constantly with then-President Reuven Rivlin, Bennett is working symbiotically with Rivlin's successor, Isaac Herzog, to promote Israel's standing in the world.<sup>59</sup> The worldly

scion of an Israeli dynasty, Herzog—the brother of the ambassador, son of Israel's sixth president, and grandson of a newly independent Israel's first chief rabbi—has been instrumental in cultivating ties with the Arab world and beyond.<sup>60</sup> It was the synchronized efforts of President Herzog, Prime Minister Bennett and Foreign Minister Lapid that secured the repatriation of an Israeli couple from Turkey in November, after they were imprisoned there on espionage charges.<sup>61</sup>

## Life After Netanyahu

This makeover does not exist in a vacuum. Benjamin Netanyahu, as opposition boss, has balked at nothing to unseat Bennett, even instructing the Likud and its confederates to block the extension of an amendment—which Netanyahu himself had shepherded annually—that prevented Palestinians married to Israelis from receiving residency in Israel.<sup>62</sup> In fact, the former prime minister has for years deliberately and consistently belittled Bennett, his former chief of staff, mocking his performance and even denying him an adequate transfer of authority.<sup>63</sup> "In two to three months," Netanyahu promised on June 13, forecasting the demise of Bennett's majority, "this thing is breaking up."<sup>64</sup> That deadline has since expired.

Netanyahu is not yet down for the count, but his influence is waning steadily. The former premier has lost important secret-ballot votes within his own Likud caucus, where contenders to the party throne have become more

55 "Secretary Antony J. Blinken on ABC's This Week with George Stephanopoulos," US Department of State, May 23, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-on-abcs-this-week-with-george-stephanopoulos/>.

56 "Meeting with Prime Minister of Israel Naftali Bennett," President of Russia, October 22, 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/66978>; Lahav Harkov, "Bennett, Putin Discuss Iran, Airstrikes in Syria in Five-Hour Meeting," *Jerusalem Post*, October 24, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/bennett-arrives-at-putins-residence-in-sochi-682820>.

57 "PM Bennett Comments on the First Anniversary of the Abraham Accords," Prime Minister's Office, September 17, 2021, [https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/spoke\\_abraham170921](https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/spoke_abraham170921); Ben Caspit, "Bennett's Government at Work to Expand Abraham Accords," *Al-Monitor*, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/10/bennetts-government-work-expand-abraham-accords#ixzz7C5Pta7tr>.

58 Suhasini Haidar, "India, Israel, UAE, U.S. Decide to Launch Quadrilateral Economic Forum," *Hindu*, October 19, 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/jaishankar-takes-part-in-new-quadrilateral-with-israel-uae-and-us/article37064989.ece>.

59 "Rivlin, in Attack on Netanyahu: 'Israel Has No Leaders,'" *Times of Israel*, March 31, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/rivlin-in-attack-on-netanyahu-israel-has-no-leaders/>.

60 Rina Bassist, "Israel's President Takes Lead on Ties with Jordan, Palestinians," *Al-Monitor*, September 9, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/09/israels-president-takes-lead-ties-jordan-palestinians#ixzz7C5R1Oqlw>.

61 Yossi Verter, "Israel's New Political Leadership Turns Diplomatic Debacle Into Turkish Delight," *Haaretz*, November 19, 2021, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-israel-s-new-political-leadership-turn-diplomatic-debacle-into-turkish-delight-1.10399036>.

62 "Palestinian Family Reunification Bill Fails to Pass Israeli Parliament Vote," *i24News*, July 6, 2021, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/politics/1625547498-palestinian-family-reunification-bill-fails-to-pass-israeli-parliament-vote>.

63 "Israeli Ministers Approve Bill to Legalize Wildcat West Bank Outpost," *i24News*, November 13, 2016, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/politics/130031-161113-netanyahu-spars-with-childish-irresponsible-bennett-over-west-bank-outposts>; Yaakov Katz, "Netanyahu's Transition to Bennett Is an Insult to Israel," *Jerusalem Post*, June 19, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/netanyahus-transition-to-bennett-is-an-insult-to-israel-opinion-671346>.

64 Noga Tarnopolsky, "Stability in Israel, as Bennett Reaches the 100-Day Mark," *Los Angeles Times*, September 20, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2021-09-20/israeli-prime-minister-naftali-bennett-100-days-into-the-job>.





Former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stands inside the courtroom as his corruption trial opens at the Jerusalem District Court, May 24, 2020. REUTERS/Ronen Zvulun.

brazenly rebellious.<sup>65</sup> A boycott of Knesset committee work, which Netanyahu initiated after the coalition grabbed most of the plum chair assignments, has begun to fray.<sup>66</sup> Although the opposition had adamantly refused to seat its legislators officially on committees, a number of them defied discipline and turned up for hearings; that levee has all but collapsed entirely.<sup>67</sup> In a flagrant breach of opposition protocol, a lawmaker from the United Torah Judaism faction even participated in a photographed meeting last August with Religious Affairs Minister Matan

Kahana, a close Bennett ally.<sup>68</sup> Netanyahu's incessant appeals to Benny Gantz to join him in toppling Bennett have fallen chronically on deaf ears.<sup>69</sup> Netanyahu has now taken to conceding begrudgingly that it could take more than three years for the Likud to wrest back the reins of government.<sup>70</sup>

A watershed moment was reached in early November, when Parliament granted its final approval of the consecutive 2021 and 2022 budgets. (None of the

65 Gil Hoffman, "Netanyahu Loses Key Vote Inside Likud Faction," *Jerusalem Post*, August 3, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/politics-and-diplomacy/netanyahu-loses-key-vote-inside-likud-faction-675711>; "Likud MK Dichter Says He'll Challenge Netanyahu for Party Leadership," *Times of Israel*, August 29, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/likud-mk-dichter-says-hell-challenge-netanyahu-for-party-leadership/>.

66 Michael Hauser Tov, "Coalition Grabs Powerful Knesset Committees, Shunting Opposition to Lesser Panels," *Haaretz*, July 13, 2021, <https://www.haaretz.com/premium-coalition-grabs-hold-of-powerful-knesset-committees-1.9995379>.

67 Gil Hoffman, "Likud Could Ban Itself from Knesset Committees," *Jerusalem Post*, September 11, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/politics-and-diplomacy/likud-could-ban-itself-from-knesset-committees-679060>; "Opposition Drops Boycott of Knesset Committees after Court Ruling," *Times of Israel*, October 26, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/opposition-drops-boycott-of-knesset-committees-after-court-ruling/>.

68 Juman, "Boycott? Porush and Breslav Activists Meet with Kahana—Minister Formulates 'Master Plan,'" *Middle East in-24*, June, <https://middleeast.in-24.com/News/112393.html>.

69 "Netanyahu Said to Again Propose Coalition Deal to Gantz that Would Make Him PM," *Times of Israel*, September 18, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-said-to-again-propose-coalition-deal-to-gantz-that-would-make-him-pm/>.

70 "Netanyahu: It Could Be Up to 3.5 Years Before Likud is Back in Power," *Times of Israel*, October 21, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-it-could-be-up-to-3-5-years-before-likud-is-back-in-power/>.

coalition's members were expected to actually reject the bill, a scenario which would have triggered an automatic election and, conceivably, precipitated a premature end to their governance experiment.)<sup>71</sup> With Bennett's cohort now entrenched and insulated effectively from challenges of the opposition's making, the political vultures are coming more persistently after Netanyahu, who led the charge against the fiscal plan from his vacation in Hawaii, and then from his quarantine inside the Knesset gallery.<sup>72</sup> Netanyahu's corruption trial, which has resumed after a three-month hiatus, will provide additional distraction and ballast for his potential drift toward irrelevance.<sup>73</sup> It has also been reported that Larry Ellison offered Netanyahu a comfortable escape route to a spot on Oracle's board of directors.<sup>74</sup>

Once the die has been cast, Bennett could conceivably tighten his grip over power amid the possibility that any four Likud parliamentarians, distraught about their place on the Knesset's back benches, might decide to defect.<sup>75</sup> An Ultra-Orthodox constituency equally unhappy with its leadership's march to opposition—and its directly related forfeiture of public resources to subsidize that community's infrastructure—could push its proxies to reach a more cooperative *modus vivendi* with the government.<sup>76</sup>

## Double or Nothing

A famous Talmudic dictum teaches that one who engages in something not for its own sake will ultimately come to engage in it for the right reasons.<sup>77</sup> The hybrid construct of Israel's current government was almost nobody's

preferred outcome. It is a work in progress whose path will not be linear or necessarily long lasting. But, some of its valuable effects—including a capacity to transcend boundaries and collaborate in service of the public good—may be enduring.

Trying to catch its stride, the Bennett government is confronting exceedingly fraught local, regional, and global environments. Pieces of pending legislation are tearing at the delicate fabric of consensus among ministers.<sup>78</sup> Gaza and Lebanon are hot zones that Israel does not wish to see descend into open warfare, but it is nonetheless forced to contemplate military action there. The advent of renewed talks with Iran has heightened stress levels in Israel—which may soon be compelled to acquiesce to a deficient nuclear deal or, alternatively, respond forcefully to a perceived threat to its national security—and is testing the limits of Bennett's reset with the Biden administration. Failed negotiations could also ignite a conflagration that spurs an arms race on Israel's doorstep. The US pullback from Afghanistan is opening the door to further chaos, which Russia, China, and Iran are poised to exploit.<sup>79</sup> Israel's new decision-makers will need to employ skilled diplomacy and military finesse in order to navigate these waters, while also mobilizing their maximum capabilities to counter the menacing outbreak of the latest coronavirus variant.

Continuing to act judiciously, and not impulsively, will boost Bennett's chances of locking in the transformational changes he has set in motion. Another pivotal factor in this dynamic will be Bennett resisting any urges to afford

71 Gil Hoffman, "Marathon Knesset Debate Begins Ahead of Critical Budget Votes," *Jerusalem Post*, November 2, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/politics-and-diplomacy/marathon-knesset-budget-debate-begins-683788>.

72 "Netanyahu's Shadow Starts to Recede in Israel," *Economist*, October 30, 2021, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2021/10/30/netanyahus-shadow-starts-to-recede-in-israel>; Gil Hoffman, "Edelstein Mocks Netanyahu for Saying Current Gov't May Last Until 2025," *Jerusalem Post*, October 23, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/politics-and-diplomacy/edelstein-mocks-netanyahu-for-saying-current-govt-will-last-until-2025-682907>; Gil Hoffman (@Gil\_Hoffman) "Former PM @netanyahu doing Pilates on vacation on Pineapple Island (Lanai) in Hawaii, as revealed by @HauserTov," Twitter, August 24, 2021, 8:10 a.m., [https://twitter.com/Gil\\_Hoffman/status/1430140530529390603](https://twitter.com/Gil_Hoffman/status/1430140530529390603); "Returning from US Vacation, Netanyahu to Vote on Budget Behind a Glass Wall," *Times of Israel*, September 2, 2021, [https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog\\_entry/returning-from-us-vacation-netanyahu-to-vote-on-budget-behind-a-glass-wall/](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/returning-from-us-vacation-netanyahu-to-vote-on-budget-behind-a-glass-wall/).

73 "Netanyahu Trial Resumes with Fresh Evidence from Walla CEO's Messages," *Times of Israel*, September 13, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-trial-to-resume-with-fresh-evidence-from-walla-ceos-messages/>.

74 Michael Hauser Tov, "Larry Ellison Offers Netanyahu Lucrative Oracle Post," *Haaretz*, September 16, 2021, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium.HIGHLIGHT-larry-ellison-netanyahu-trial-witness-offers-ex-pm-seat-on-oracle-board-1.10209042>.

75 "Knesset Plenum Approves Bill Enabling Four MKs to Break Away from Their Faction, Even if They Do Not Constitute One Third of It," *Knesset News*, July 7, 2021, <https://main.knesset.gov.il/EN/News/PressReleases/Pages/press070721b.aspx>.

76 Haviv Gur, "Can the Haredi Parties Afford a Long Stay in the Opposition?" *Times of Israel*, June 23, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/can-the-haredi-parties-afford-a-long-stay-in-the-opposition/>; Yehuda Shlezinger and Danielle Roth-Avneri, "Is the Bennett-Lapid Coalition Playing Footsie with Haredi Parties?" *Israel Hayom*, November 5, 2021, <https://www.israelhayom.com/2021/11/05/is-the-mainly-secular-coalition-playing-footsie-with-the-haredi-parties/>.

77 Sanhedrin 105b:12, *William Davidson Talmud*, <https://www.sefaria.org/Sanhedrin.105b.12?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>.

78 "Shaked Opposes Bill to Ban Indicted Politician from Forming Government," *Times of Israel*, July 25, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/shaked-opposes-bill-to-ban-indicted-politician-from-forming-government/>.

79 Paul Shinkman, "U.S. Adversaries Seize Upon Afghanistan Collapse," *US News and World Report*, August 16, 2021, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world-report/articles/2021-08-16/us-adversaries-seize-upon-afghanistan-collapse>.



Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett chairs the first weekly cabinet meeting of his new government in Jerusalem June 20, 2021. Emmanuel Dunand/Pool via REUTERS.

precedence to political considerations over the data-driven imperatives of responsible policy, a trap into which his predecessor fell repeatedly.<sup>80</sup> Laying the intellectual and logistical groundwork for an orderly transition of portfolios between rotating ministers when Lapid takes over in 2023 will provide essential coherence for the consolidations of Bennett's achievements.

If Bennett maintains his focus on engagement and deconfliction—instead of confrontation—with members of his cabinet, domestic Israeli constituencies, and foreign heads of state, his ability to manage crises will be enhanced, with partners being more inclined to understand his and Israel's red lines. Similarly, his latitude to pursue policies without pushback will increase to the extent that he is prepared to take conciliatory steps toward the Palestinians.

When all is said and done, however, the prime minister will be judged not only on atmospheric, but also on his success in delivering tangible peace and prosperity to Israelis. He will be tested vigorously, and will often need to restrain ministers on his right—with whose goals he will no doubt identify—and on his left whose compulsions to implement their particular agendas could jeopardize his razor-thin Knesset majority. These pressures will unquestionably intensify now that the budget has passed and the government enjoys increased breathing room. So far, its integrity, from the United Arab List on the left to Bennett's own Yamina on the right, remains intact, with many of the protagonists recognizing that they have no better alternatives to the prevailing constellation of power.

Today, Naftali Bennett is a political anomaly, a prime minister without a robust, natural base of support.<sup>81</sup> His Yamina party, still floundering lethargically at the polls, might not survive Israel's next election unless it

<sup>80</sup> Shalom Lipner, "A Mess at the Knesset," *Foreign Affairs*, April 26, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/israel/2018-04-26/mess-knesset>.

<sup>81</sup> Mazal Mualem, "Israel's Bennett Has Lost His Voter Base," *Al-Monitor*, September 13, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/09/israels-bennett-has-lost-his-voter-base>.

merges with another slate.<sup>82</sup> But, paradoxically, Bennett's precarious situation is liberating. With little to lose and plenty of his own money in the bank to weather the prospect of unemployment, he has the agency to govern by his personal compass, leaving a legacy that—whenever the time comes—Lapid and others might build upon. And, because that moment could come sooner rather than later, he had better work fast.

**Shalom Lipner**, a nonresident senior fellow for Middle East Programs at the Atlantic Council, served seven consecutive Israeli premiers over a quarter century at the Prime Minister's Office in Jerusalem.

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82 "Poll: 34 Seats for Likud, 7 for Bennet," *Artuz Sheva*, October 12, 2021, <https://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/314935>.





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*List as of November 22, 2021*



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