

ISSUE BRIEF

Netanyahu's coalition isn't built to last: Expect high sparks within and fragile prospects for Israel's incoming government

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COMPETING AGENDAS BETWEEN THE MEMBERS OF ISRAEL'S INCOMING GOVERNMENT PORTEND ANOTHER UNSUSTAINABLE PARTNERSHIP.

Four years and five elections since the dissolution of the last Knesset to survive until its second birthday, returning Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu sits atop a sixty-four seat coalition which he contends will serve out a full term.¹ Enthusiasts are heralding the establishment, finally, of a durable and homogenous leadership to pilot the country's ship of state. The fine print suggests otherwise.

Conventional wisdom imparts that the new ruling cohort will operate as a unified, conservative bloc to exercise control over the official instruments of power. That prognosis denies adequate attention to the nuanced differences between the various players on Team Netanyahu. Their divergent priorities—and the inevitable tension emanating from their efforts to placate overlapping, but not identical constituencies—reveal an underestimated fragility that will threaten its prospects.

The Atlantic Council is a nonprofit organization that provides constructive US leadership and engagement in international affairs based on the central role of the Atlantic community in meeting today's global challenges.

¹ "Bill for the Dissolution of the 20th Knesset Passes Final Vote; Early Elections Set for April 9." Main.knesset.gov.il, The Knesset, 26 Dec. 2018, <https://main.knesset.gov.il/EN/News/PressReleases/Pages/press2612f.aspx>; Eliav Breuer, and Shira Silkoff, "Netanyahu: We Will Establish a Stable Government for a Full Term." The Jerusalem Post | JPost.com, December 28, 2022. <https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/article-725985>.

The hawkish Likud, born in 1973 as an alliance of several right-wing factions, sports a mixed secular-religious pedigree and a declared penchant for free market economics.² Scoring highest in last November's ballot, it enjoys a counterintuitive foothold among Israel's less privileged enclaves, where Netanyahu—in his unmatched sixteenth year as premier—has cast himself ironically as a fellow target of discrimination by the country's so-called elites.³ The Religious Zionist Party (RZP), a militaristic champion of the settlement movement, represents itself as the political home of a demographic for whom the existence of the State of Israel is a catalyst hastening the Messiah's arrival.⁴ The rabbinic stewards of Shas and United Torah Judaism (UTJ), two ultra-Orthodox caucuses which are decidedly opposed to RZP-style sanctification of the modern Israeli state, are preoccupied with fortifying their own insular communities.⁵

A motley crew that corresponds comfortably with the ideological hues of today's Republican party in the United States, Netanyahu and his teammates will be bickering incessantly—just like the GOP—over the direction and soul of their mutual enterprise.⁶

NARROW CONSENSUS

It came as little surprise, Netanyahu's ambitious timeline notwithstanding, that the horse-trading which customarily precedes the formation of all Israeli governments was stretched out until the eleventh hour.⁷ Bargaining continued unabated even after his formal announcement to President Isaac Herzog on December 21 that the lineup was complete. But as negotiators toiled, understandably, to maximize their gains, the fault lines between their positions came into clearer view.⁸

If the superglue that fused together Israel's previous caretakers in an unlikely eight-party alliance was their shared commitment to ousting Netanyahu, their successors are aligned similarly around one overarching issue.⁹ Joining the Likud, RZP, Shas, and UTJ at the hip is their unbridled passion to circumscribe the authority of the courts which, by their narrative, have intervened illegitimately to obstruct the democratic will of the citizenry as it would be implemented by the Knesset majority—i.e., them.¹⁰ (Secondary villains on their most-wanted list include the state attorney, the media and the academy, although none of these institutions is a monolith.)¹¹

- 2 Adam Haskel, "Netanyahu: Free Market Key to Israel's Military and Diplomatic Strength," JNS.org, January 4, 2023, <https://www.jns.org/netanyahu-free-market-key-to-israels-military-and-diplomatic-strength/>.
- 3 "Authorization of the Election Results by the 25th Knesset Central Elections Committee Presidency and Plenum," Gov.il (25th Knesset Central Elections Committee, November 9, 2022), <https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/dover57>; Isabel Kershner, "In Israel's Poorer Periphery, Legal Woes Don't Dent Netanyahu's Appeal," *The New York Times* March 17, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/17/world/middleeast/benjamin-netanyahu-israel-likud.html>; Mazal Mualem, "Netanyahu Turns Discrimination Resentment into Strategy," *Al Monitor*, May 4, 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2017/05/israel-likud-benjamin-netanyahu-media-newspaper-left-right.html>.
- 4 Eliav Breuer, "Religious-Zionist Rabbis to Smotrich: Demand Defense Ministry," *The Jerusalem Post* | JPost.com, November 14, 2022, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/politics-and-diplomacy/article-722329>.
- 5 Itzik Brandwein, "Shas Council of Torah Sages Fails to Decide on Distribution of Ministerial Portfolios," *Israel National News*, November 13, 2022, <https://www.israelnationalnews.com/news/362697>; *Israel National News*, "United Torah Judaism: 'We Won't Sign without Detailed Agreement on Religion and State,'" *Israel National News*, November 29, 2022, <https://www.israelnationalnews.com/news/363614>; Anshel Pfeffer, "What's Really behind the Extreme Ultra-Orthodox Demands," *Haaretz.com*, December 13, 2022, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-12-13/ty-article/.highlight/whats-really-behind-haredi-coalition-demands-such-as-restricting-electricity-on-shabbat/00000185-0be2-d81a-adaf-4feb95630000>.
- 6 Tal Shalev, "Netanyahu Is Paying the Price for Gaining Haredi, Far-Right's Loyalty," *The Jerusalem Post* | JPost.com, November 25, 2022, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/politics-and-diplomacy/article-723314>; Lisa Mascaro and Farnoush Amiri, "Chaotic Scene Unfolds as McCarthy Fails on 14th Ballot for Speaker," *Public Broadcasting Service (PBS)*, January 7, 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/chaotic-scene-unfolds-as-mccarthy-fails-on-14th-ballot-for-speaker>.
- 7 Luke Tress and Times of Israel staff, "As Final Votes Tallied, Netanyahu Reportedly Rushing to Form Government Quickly," *The Times of Israel*, November 3, 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/as-final-votes-tallied-netanyahu-reportedly-looks-to-retake-power-by-mid-november/>.
- 8 Michael Hauser Tov, "Netanyahu Informs President He Has Formed a Government," *Haaretz.com*, December 21, 2022, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-12-21/ty-article/netanyahu-informs-president-he-has-formed-a-coalition/00000185-34ee-d85b-a9ad-76fe2040000>.
- 9 Haviv Rettig Gur, "Netanyahu, Not Lapid or Bennett, Is the Chief Architect of His Looming Undoing," *The Times of Israel*, June 9, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-not-lapid-or-bennett-is-the-chief-architect-of-his-looming-undoing/>; i24NEWS, "Israel: Coalition Agreements Signed with All 8 Factions," *i24NEWS*, June 11, 2021, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/politics/1623411485-israel-coalition-agreements-signed-with-all-8-factions>.
- 10 Adam Haskel, "'Overriding' Supreme Court Emerges as Priority in Israel's Coalition Negotiations," *JNS.org*, November 18, 2022, <https://www.jns.org/overriding-supreme-court-emerges-as-priority-in-israels-coalition-negotiations/>.
- 11 i24NEWS, "Israel Police Order Extra Protection for Netanyahu Prosecutors," *i24NEWS*, March 4, 2019, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/196403-190304-israel-police-order-extra-protection-for-prosecutors-in-netanyahu-graft-cases/>; *Times of Israel* staff, "Israel Press Council Chief Warns of Attacks on Freedom of Press under New Coalition," *The Times of Israel*, November 29, 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-press-council-chief-warns-of-expected-attacks-on-freedom-of-press/>; Shira Kadari-Ovadia, "Israeli Right-Wing NGO Doxxes Dozens of Left-Leaning Academics," *Haaretz.com*, *Haaretz*, May 13, 2019, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2019-05-13/ty-article/.premium/israeli-right-wing-ngo-publishes-details-on-dozens-of-left-leaning-professors/0000017f-f042-dc28-a17f-fc77d60d0000>; Yair Altman, "Justice Minister Succeeds in Appointing 2 Conservatives to Supreme Court," *Israel Hayom*, February 23, 2018, <https://www.israelhayom.com/2018/02/23/justice-minister-succeeds-in-appointing-2-conservatives-to-supreme-court/>.



Israel President Isaac Herzog gives Benjamin Netanyahu the mandate to form a new government after the victory of his right-wing alliance in the November election. REUTERS/Ronen Zvulun TPX IMAGES OF THE DAY

Each of these factions has a roster of standing beefs with the judiciary. RZP has been exasperated by Supreme Court decisions to, among other things, impede the legalization of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and preclude the disqualification of several Arab politicians running for public office.¹² Shas and UTJ are incensed at the judges for blocking parliamentary initiatives to exempt ultra-Orthodox youth from conscription into the Israel Defense Forces.¹³ Netanyahu has been rebuffed repeatedly in his attempts to convince the court that his corruption charges should be dismissed and his trial terminated.¹⁴ The appointment of Yariv Levin, his consigliere

and a fierce judicial critic, as justice minister was the harbinger of a campaign to overhaul the entire system—which, by Levin’s own admission, has been inspired, at least partially, by the indictments against Netanyahu.¹⁵

The first shots came already before the new squad was unveiled and sworn in. A December 27 amendment to Israel’s law that codifies eligibility to serve as a government minister cleared the path for Shas principal Aryeh Deri to assume the interior and health portfolios—despite his prior conviction on tax-related crimes—and for RZP’s Bezalel Smotrich to

12 Supreme Court of Israel, “Israel: Supreme Court Voids Law Legalizing Settlements Built on Unauthorized and Privately Owned Land in West Bank,” The Library of Congress, July 14, 2020, <https://www.loc.gov/item/global-legal-monitor/2020-07-14/israel-supreme-court-voids-law-legalizing-settlements-built-on-unauthorized-and-privately-owned-land-in-west-bank/>; “Ben Gvir Appeals to Disqualify All Arabs Running for Knesset,” The Jerusalem Post | JPost.com, February 12, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/ben-gvir-appeals-to-disqualify-all-arabs-running-for-knesset-658720>.

13 Times of Israel staff, “High Court Strikes down Law That Postponed Ultra-Orthodox Draft,” The Times of Israel, September 12, 2017, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/high-court-strikes-down-law-postponing-ultra-orthodox-draft/>.

14 Jeremy Sharon, “Netanyahu Files Motion to Dismiss Bribery, Fraud Charges, Citing Investigation Flaws,” The Times of Israel, August 11, 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-files-motion-to-dismiss-bribery-fraud-charges-citing-investigation-flaws/>.

15 Arutz Sheva staff, “Minister Levin: ‘Supreme Court Is Leading Us to Anarchy,’” Israel National News, March 24, 2020, <https://www.israelnationalnews.com/news/277726>; Times of Israel staff, “Levin: Netanyahu’s Indictments Contributed to ‘Public Understanding’ of Need for Reform,” The Times of Israel, January 16, 2023, https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/levin-netanyahus-indictments-contributed-to-public-understanding-of-need-for-reform/.

supplement his finance portfolio with a concurrent post at the Ministry of Defense, where he will assume responsibility for the bureaucracy that manages civilian affairs in the West Bank.¹⁶ A second act of legislation the following day set the stage for RZP's Itamar Ben-Gvir, the gun-toting national security minister, to exercise unprecedented command over the Israel Police, with the capacity to direct policy and exercise influence over its investigations.¹⁷ The Supreme Court's January 18 bombshell ruling which ordered Netanyahu to remove Deri from his ministerial positions—due to the “unreasonableness” of his appointments and inconsistencies relating to his earlier plea bargain—has sent the country spinning toward an epic showdown.¹⁸

Hanging ominously over the heads of the justices is the coalition's threat to pass an override stipulation that would empower the Knesset to flout Supreme Court pronouncements as the spirit moves them.¹⁹ A sixty-one vote threshold being proposed for that sanction could effectively neutralize the vital function of judicial review.²⁰ The maneuver, which was included explicitly in the coalition's founding agreements, was launched ceremoniously by Levin during a prime-time press conference on January 4.²¹ Other elements of Levin's scheme would inject greater politicization into the appointment process for judges and general counsels.²² It was telling that

Attorney-General Gali Baharav-Miara was conspicuously uninvited to the first meeting of Netanyahu's cabinet, many of whose members view her as a treacherous fifth column in their midst and are angling to end her contract.²³

According to Netanyahu, since the Israeli electorate was fully cognizant of his program when it went to the polls, he requires no further authorization to go full steam ahead.²⁴ Despite his assurances to U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan that the package will be passed ultimately with “wide agreement,” there is little optimism at this juncture that President Herzog's attempt to mediate between the parties and avert a constitutional crisis can succeed.²⁵

FRIENDLY FIRE

But unity of purpose on the legal battlefield should not be mistaken as proof of convergence on other fronts. While protagonists of Israel's last government turned out to be surprisingly respectful toward each other, it is suspicion and resentment that are the evident hallmarks of the relationships between their replacements.²⁶

RZP and the Likud sparred bitterly in the run-up to the election and during its aftermath. Recordings surfaced in October of

16 David Isaac, “Knesset Passes ‘Smotrich-Deri’ Amendment,” JNS.org, December 27, 2022, <https://www.jns.org/knesset-passes-smotrich-deri-amendment/>; Times of Israel staff, “Court Sentences Deri in Plea Bargain Conviction on Tax Offenses,” The Times of Israel, February 1, 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/court-sentences-deri-in-plea-bargain-conviction-on-tax-offenses/>.

17 Times of Israel staff, “Extremist MK Ben Gvir Pulls out Gun during Sheikh Jarrah Clash,” The Times of Israel, October 14, 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/extremist-mk-ben-gvir-pulls-out-gun-during-sheikh-jarrah-clashes/>; Carrie Keller-Lynn, “Knesset Passes ‘Ben Gvir Law,’ Cementing Minister's Expanded Powers over Police,” The Times of Israel, December 28, 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/knesset-passes-ben-gvir-law-cementing-ministers-expanded-powers-over-police/>.

18 Michael Starr, “Israel's High Court Blocks Arye Deri from Serving as Minister,” The Jerusalem Post | JPost.com, January 18, 2023, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-728898>.

19 Barak Ravid, “Inside Netanyahu Bloc's Push to Curb Power of Israel's Supreme Court,” Axios, November 16, 2022, <https://www.axios.com/2022/11/16/netanyahu-power-override-israel-supreme-court>.

20 “Levin to Unveil Sweeping Court Reform Plan,” The Times of Israel, January 4, 2023, https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/levin-to-unveil-sweeping-court-reform-plan/.

21 “Coalition Deals Include Discrimination Bill, Judicial Override, Immigration Reform,” The Times of Israel, December 28, 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/coalition-deals-include-discrimination-bill-judicial-override-immigration-reform/>; Avishai Grinzaig, “Levin Unveils Plan to Reduce Power of Israel's Supreme Court,” Globes, January 5, 2023, <https://en.globes.co.il/en/article-levin-unveils-plan-to-reduce-power-of-israels-supreme-court-1001434722>.

22 “Justice Minister Announces Reforms: It Is Time to Act,” Israel National News, January 4, 2023, <https://www.israelnationalnews.com/news/365428>.

23 Jeremy Sharon, “New Government Fails to Invite Ag to First Cabinet Meeting, amid Threats to Fire Her,” The Times of Israel, December 29, 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/new-government-fails-to-invite-ag-to-first-cabinet-meeting-amid-threats-to-fire-her/>.

24 i24NEWS, “Netanyahu: ‘Millions of Israelis Demanded to Reform the Justice System in the Elections,’” i24NEWS, January 15, 2023, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/politics/1673778828-netanyahu-millions-of-israelis-demanded-to-reform-the-justice-system>.

25 Times of Israel staff, “Netanyahu Said to Tell Us Nat'l Security Adviser Judicial Reform Plan to Be Softened,” The Times of Israel, January 22, 2023, https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/netanyahu-said-to-tell-us-adviser-sullivan-that-judicial-reform-plan-to-be-softened/. “Herzog Tries to Calm Judicial Reforms Crisis amid Widespread Protest,” The Jerusalem Post | JPost.com, January 15, 2023, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/politics-and-diplomacy/article-728566>.

26 Ned Temko, “In Israel, an Inspiring Political Model That ... Failed,” The Christian Science Monitor, December 1, 2022, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2022/1201/In-Israel-an-inspiring-political-model-that-failed>.



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and members of his new right-wing government look on as the government is sworn in at the Knesset. REUTERS/Amir Cohen/Pool

Smotrich branding Netanyahu as a “liar” and a “tragedy” who is likely to ultimately be found guilty in court.²⁷ Smotrich was compelled subsequently to eat crow and walk his comments back in multiple interviews.²⁸ That didn’t prevent Levin from later characterizing Smotrich as “delusional” for aspiring to “take control over half of the government.”²⁹

In December, Netanyahu took a swipe at his Shas and UTJ affiliates.³⁰ “They didn’t work, they just had a lot of children, which the public sector had to pay for,” he described the situation facing him as finance minister back in 2002. The

solution to that problem, he told interviewer Jordan Peterson tactlessly, was “to put the fat man on a diet.” As for the ultra-Orthodox population, a long and storied record speaks to frequent intercommunal feuding over primacy and the extent of their integration into broader society.³¹

Not to be overlooked either are in-house squabbles within the Likud family, where many feel deeply humiliated by the experience of recent months and motivated to contest Netanyahu’s grip over the party. Amid complaints that RZP, Shas, and UTJ walked away with the choicest spoils and left

27 “In Leaked Tape, Far-Right Netanyahu Ally Calls the Former PM a ‘Liar’ and a ‘Tragedy,’” Haaretz.com, October 23, 2022, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/elections/2022-10-23/ty-article/.premium/in-leaked-tape-far-right-netanyahu-ally-calls-the-former-pm-a-liar-and-a-tragedy/00000184-061f-d736-abc7-1fbf09880000>.

28 Ash Obel, “Netanyahu Says He ‘Forgives’ Smotrich for Calling Him a Liar in Leaked Recording,” The Times of Israel, October 24, 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-says-he-forgives-smotrich-for-calling-him-a-liar-in-leaked-recording/>.

29 Eliav Breuer, “Religious Zionist Party, Likud Slam Each Other for Delayed Negotiations,” The Jerusalem Post | JPost.com, November 23, 2022, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-723180>.

30 “‘The Public Paid for Them’: Netanyahu Says Haredim in Past Created Economic Burden,” The Times of Israel, December 22, 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/the-public-paid-for-them-netanyahu-says-haredim-in-past-created-economic-burden/>.

31 David Israel, “Agudah Threatening to Erase Gafni’s Lithuanian Faction,” The Jewish Press, August 18, 2022, <https://www.jewishpress.com/news/politics/agudah-threatening-to-erase-gafnis-lithuanian-faction/2022/08/18/>; Kobi Nachshoni, “Religious Factions Threaten to Split over School Curriculum,” ynetnews, August 29, 2022, <https://www.ynetnews.com/article/r1wzkk9jo>.

them with slim pickings, senior Likud figures have been forced to accept what appear to many as consolation prizes: rotating stints as ministers with neutered briefs, carved up to satisfy the hefty demands of other caucuses, with others being left out in the cold empty-handed.³² Although malcontents have been reluctant historically to rebel against the Netanyahu franchise, a few wayward hands absented themselves from crucial votes in parliament are locked and loaded to spark a rebellion that could accelerate a collapse of government.

HOME AND AWAY

The frontier separating Likud and its religiously observant confederates is the (Mediterranean and Jordan River) water's edge. Netanyahu has proclaimed repeatedly that his foremost consideration will be given to matters of foreign policy, namely foiling Iran's designs to acquire a nuclear weapons capability and bringing Saudi Arabia into the fold of neighboring countries that normalized ties with the Jewish state under the 2020 Abraham Accords.³³ RZP, Shas, and UTJ are content essentially to let the prime minister sow his oats abroad. As far as they are concerned, the world is his (unkosher) oyster.

What they want in exchange is a license to reign over domestic affairs. They've made no secret of their intention to tinker with the delicate social compact that undergirds Israel's national life. (It's no coincidence that the word "national" has become a popular feature of their ministerial titles.)³⁴ Among the hot-button issues on their radar are standards for conversion to

Judaism, immigration to Israel, and certification of kashruth practices—all slated to be brought into line with the most stringent interpretations of Jewish law.³⁵ The ultra-Orthodox also seek to rollback restrictions on gender segregation at publicly funded events.³⁶

Geostrategically, RZP has its sights trained on Jerusalem and the West Bank. Five years since the last time any sitting Israeli minister stepped onto the Temple Mount, Ben-Gvir put the volatile site on his official itinerary during his first week on the job. (The rabbinical patrons of Shas and UTJ object vehemently to the idea of Jews visiting the mount under the prevailing circumstances.)³⁷ From his Defense Ministry perch, Smotrich is dedicated to advancing the cause of Israeli sovereignty within Judea and Samaria—an objective which he incorporated into RZP's signed deal with the Likud.³⁸

Taken together, this is an inelegant recipe for turmoil. The structural integrity of Netanyahu's coalition will begin to degrade inevitably as its members prove unable to prevent themselves from careening into each other's lanes.

FORESHOCKS

Israel's thirty-seventh government is barely one-month old and Netanyahu's Twitter feed is already replete with myriad "clarifications" of its ignoble behavior, directed often at the country's LGBTQ community.³⁹ On December 25, he inveighed twice against comments made by RZP's Orit Strock—since crowned Israel's new minister of national missions—after

32 Amir Ettinger, "Likud MKs Lament Netanyahu's Generous Offer to Religious Parties," Israel Hayom, December 1, 2022, <https://www.israelhayom.com/2022/12/01/likud-mks-lament-netanyahus-generous-offer-to-religious-parties/>; "Cohen Said Set to Serve as Foreign Minister for a Year, Followed by 2 Years for Israel Katz," The Times of Israel, December 29, 2022, https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/cohen-said-set-to-serve-as-foreign-minister-for-a-year-followed-by-2-years-for-israel-katz/; "Alarmed Education Officials Warn Ministry Will Be 'Dismantled' under New Government," The Times of Israel, December 6, 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/alarmed-education-officials-warn-ministry-will-be-dismantled-under-new-government/>; Eliav Breuer, "Disgruntled Likud MKs Could Maneuver against Netanyahu," The Jerusalem Post | JPost.com, December 29, 2022, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/politics-and-diplomacy/article-726192>.

33 Ben Caspit, "Netanyahu Puts Iran, Saudi Arabia at Top of Agenda," Al Monitor, December 27, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/12/netanyahu-puts-iran-saudi-arabia-top-agenda>.

34 David Isaac, "Who's Who in Netanyahu's Government," JNS.org, December 29, 2022, <https://www.jns.org/updated-list-of-ministers-in-netanyahu-government/>.

35 Judy Maltz, "How Proposed Changes to Israel's Conversion Policy Will Impact Thousands of Jews," Haaretz.com, December 1, 2022, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-12-01/ty-article/.highlight/how-proposed-changes-to-israels-conversion-policy-will-impact-thousands-of-jews/00000184-c8dd-d180-a99e-d8fd51f60000>. Judah Ari Gross, "Political Deals over Law of Return Set Stage for Fight over Future of Immigration," The Times of Israel, December 25, 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/political-deals-over-law-of-return-set-stage-for-fight-over-future-of-immigration/>; Judah Ari Gross, "Shas Minister Signs Order 'Canceling' Kashrut Reform Law Passed by Knesset," The Times of Israel, December 29, 2022, https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/shas-minister-signs-order-canceling-kashrut-reform-law-passed-by-knesset/.

36 Judah Ari Gross, "Orthodox Parties Demand Legalization of Gender-Segregated Public Events," The Times of Israel, November 20, 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/orthodox-parties-demand-legalization-of-gender-segregated-public-events/>.

37 Eliav Breuer, "UTJ's Gafni Slams Ben-Gvir, Says Temple Mount Visit Violated Jewish Law," The Jerusalem Post | JPost.com, January 4, 2023, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-726611>; "Chief Rabbi Slams Ben Gvir for Violating Rabbinic Guidelines by Visiting Temple Mount," The Times of Israel, January 3, 2023, https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/chief-rabbi-slams-ben-gvir-for-violating-rabbinic-guidelines-by-visiting-temple-mount/.

38 Tovah Lazaroff, "Israel's New Gov't Pledges to Promote West Bank Annexation Policies," The Jerusalem Post | JPost.com, December 28, 2022, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/politics-and-diplomacy/article-726002>.

39 Carrie Keller-Lynn, "Netanyahu Puts Extremist Homophobic Politician in Charge of Israel's Jewish Identity," The Times of Israel, November 27, 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-puts-extremist-homophobic-politician-in-charge-of-israels-jewish-identity/>.



Tens of thousands of Israelis protest in pouring rain during a demonstration at Habima Square in Tel Aviv after Netanyahu's right-wing government launched proposals to weaken the Supreme Court. (Photo by Eyal Warshavsky / SOPA Images/Sipa USA)

she suggested that forthcoming legislative amendments, to which the Likud has consented, will permit doctors to withhold treatment if it contravenes their religious faith.⁴⁰ Many of the brownie points that the prime minister had hoped to win from appointing loyalist Amir Ohana, an openly homosexual Likud politician, as Knesset speaker have since dissipated in a flurry of homophobic smears from within his own camp. In having to defend Ohana's honor in the face of attacks by prominent rabbis against his sexual orientation, Netanyahu managed to highlight the dubiousness of his claim that "we were chosen to lead . . . in the way of the liberal right."⁴¹ Jurisdiction over an

Education Ministry unit that administers external programming has been handed over to an RZP-affiliated deputy minister whose main purpose is to block the infiltration of "progressive" ideas into Israeli society.⁴²

That's not all. UTJ chief Yitzhak Goldknopf has demanded a halt to railway construction on Shabbat, which, by his reading, constitutes a flagrant violation of an unequivocal Likud pledge to his faction. Goldknopf's warning that "we cannot put up with this situation" has, thus far at least, not persuaded the Ministry of Transportation to suspend maintenance work on the

40 Benjamin Netanyahu. "דבריה של ח"כ אורית סטרוק אינם מקובלים עליי ועל חבריי בליכוד. ההסכמים הקואליציוניים לא מאפשרים להפלות לרעה להט"בים או לפגוע בזכויותיהם לקבל." Twitter. December 25, 2022. https://twitter.com/netanyahu/status/1606962990925975553?s=20&t=1vr90xWKCeScRQPK2_z-DA; Benjamin Netanyahu, "תחת כהונתי לא ניתן להפלות לרעה להט"בים או לפגוע בזכויותיהם." Twitter. December 25, 2022. https://twitter.com/netanyahu/status/1607037125400334339?s=20&t=1vr90xWKCeScRQPK2_z-DA; Eliav Breuer, "'Discrimination Law' in Israel Coalition Deal despite Netanyahu's Claims," The Jerusalem Post | JPost.com, December 28, 2022, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/politics-and-diplomacy/article-726021>.

41 Benjamin Netanyahu, "חביב אדם שנברא בצלם." "ל אדם נברא בצלם אלוהים. זה העיקרון שהובא," Twitter January 1, 2023, https://twitter.com/netanyahu/status/1609618940287672320?s=20&t=1vr90xWKCeScRQPK2_z-DA; Judah Ari Gross, "'God Have Mercy': J'lem Chief Rabbi Pans Orthodox MKS Who Backed Gay Knesset Speaker," The Times of Israel, January 1, 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/jerusalem-chief-rabbi-pans-religious-mks-who-backed-ohana-as-1st-gay-knesset-speaker/>; Times of Israel staff, "Netanyahu: There Will Be Electricity on Shabbat, Religious Status Quo Will Continue," The Times of Israel, December 13, 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-there-will-be-electricity-on-shabbat-religious-status-quo-will-continue/>.

42 Eliav Breuer, "Avi Maoz Takes Partial Control of Israeli Education after Cabinet Approval," The Jerusalem Post , January 15, 2023, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/politics-and-diplomacy/article-728624>.

weekend, something which would paralyze traffic networks on busy workdays instead.⁴³ And within the Likud, erstwhile Netanyahu ally David Amsalem, who was passed over for a ministerial post, has accused the prime minister publicly of racism and prejudice against Sephardic Jews, who comprise the bulk of the party's base.⁴⁴

The Israeli-Palestinian arena will supply regular clashes as well. Smotrich and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant have been feuding intensely over the division of labor between them in the West Bank.⁴⁵ On January 20, Gallant ordered the immediate dismantling of an unauthorized settlement outpost, over the expressed instruction of Smotrich, who called for the evacuation to be halted until he and Gallant could discuss the matter after the weekend.⁴⁶ Smotrich and his fellow RZP ministers boycotted the following Sunday's cabinet meeting in protest—and threatened to absent themselves from Knesset votes as well—until Netanyahu makes good on his guarantees to Smotrich regarding the latter's license to manage civil affairs in the territory.⁴⁷

Smotrich's annexationist plans will come into precise conflict with Netanyahu's spirited overtures to Saudi Arabia, where annexation would be anathema.⁴⁸ (The flood of criticism from Riyadh and other world capitals over Ben-Gvir's Temple

Mount jaunt offered an early indicator of how the actions of Netanyahu's associates will contrive to jeopardize his own goals.)⁴⁹ One only needs to rewind the tape to know how this will play out. Forced to choose between exactly the same two policy vectors back in 2020, Netanyahu shelved his annexation push for the sake of concluding the Abraham Accords with the United Arab Emirates.⁵⁰ He's signaling his willingness to make the same tradeoff with Riyadh now.⁵¹

Moreover, given his already tense relationship with Democrats in Washington—where they control both the White House and the Senate—Netanyahu will be loath to antagonize them further. Deferring to the fundamentalist impulses and expansionist dreams of his partners will not win the prime minister any additional sympathy from President Joe Biden—or the majority of American Jews, who support the Democratic Party—at a time when Israel will be seeking to enlist robust US cooperation in promoting regional normalization, containing Iran and meeting other international challenges.⁵² Biden administration officials have said repeatedly that they will hold Netanyahu personally responsible for the actions of his coalition's renegades.⁵³ RZP, Shas, and UTJ are likely to find themselves frustrated at almost every turn. And with Deri's political future now hanging in limbo, their level of agitation is peaking.

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45 "Report: Smotrich and Gallant Have Clashed Numerous Times over Past Weeks," *Israel National News*, January 23, 2023, <https://www.israelnationalnews.com/flushes/597837>.

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47 Shmuel Smith, "Religious Zionism Boycotts Cabinet Meeting over Outpost Conflict," *Hamodia*, January 22, 2023, <https://hamodia.com/2023/01/22/religious-zionism-boycotts-cabinet-meeting-over-outpost-conflict/>.

48 Lahav Harkov, "Smotrich Demands De Facto Annexation across West Bank in Negotiations," *The Jerusalem Post | JPost.com*, November 8, 2022, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-721795>.

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51 Tovah Lazaroff, "Netanyahu Pushing for Saudi-Israel Deal with Annexation Pledge - Report," *The Jerusalem Post*, December 25, 2022, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-725732>.

52 Ron Kampeas, "Polls Show Most US Jewish Voters Backed Democrats amid Democracy and Abortion Fears," *The Times of Israel*, November 11, 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/polls-show-most-us-jewish-voters-backed-democrats-amid-democracy-and-abortion-fears/>; Ghaida Ghantous, "Israel's Netanyahu Urges Us to Reaffirm Commitment to Saudi Arabia - Al Arabiya," *Reuters*, December 15, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/israels-netanyahu-urges-us-reaffirm-commitment-saudi-arabia-al-arabiya-2022-12-15/>; Yaniv Kubovich, "Despite Biden's Comment, Israeli Officials Fear U.S. Still Keen on Iran Nuclear Deal," *Haaretz.com*, *Haaretz*, December 27, 2022, <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/2022-12-27/ty-article/.premium/israeli-officials-say-iran-nuclear-deal-isnt-dead/00000185-4fe1-d124-abb7-4fed0ee50000>; Mike Wagenheim, "Analysis: Next Conflict Will Be next True Test of Israel-U.S. Bond in UN," *I24NEWS*, December 20, 2022, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/diplomacy/1671545448-analysis-next-regional-flare-up-will-be-next-true-test-for-u-s-israel-relationship..>

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BOILING POINT

Smotrich, Ben-Gvir, Deri, and Goldknopf are not naive. They came to play hardball. In 2021, Smotrich single-handedly thwarted Netanyahu's prospects of forming a government by rejecting an instrumental alliance with the United Arab List, which then joined hands with Bennett and Lapid to topple Netanyahu.⁵⁴ With Israel's purse strings now in his hands, Finance Minister Smotrich is well-poised to assert his interests. If he doesn't get his way during this at bat, he could end Netanyahu's season prematurely again.

With little faith in Netanyahu's commitments, Smotrich and Co. front-loaded their demands, driving hard bargains for plum positions, deep budgets, and expansive fiefdoms—from which they intend to strike while the iron is hot. They also insisted on the passage of the eponymous Deri, Smotrich, and Ben-Gvir laws even before signing on the dotted line. Their doubts about Netanyahu's trustworthiness have only been confirmed by his pushback against their statements and his backpedaling on promises to them.⁵⁵

RZP, Shas, and UTJ know intuitively that their arrangement may not last forever and that—as soon as they finish helping Netanyahu to procure a “get out of jail free” card for himself—he could cast them swiftly by the wayside. Contrary to what some may believe mistakenly, they do not comprise his Dream Team. He has always preferred to be balanced at the ideological center of his cabinets, letting partisan influences on both flanks cancel each other out. The pressure of the current alignment skews uncomfortably rightward for him, putting him in a tweezer movement between his activist coalition and a fate of international scorn.

Underscoring Netanyahu's dilemma are initial alarm bells from Standard & Poor, the credit rating service.⁵⁶ “The announced judicial system changes...could in the future present downside

risks to [Israel's] ratings,” S&P reported on January 12, amid profound concern of a “security situation which could be undermined in a scenario of more hardline policies.” Hundreds of the country's preeminent economists, including its current and two former central bank governors, have issued similar distress calls.⁵⁷ A galvanized opposition—which turned out well over 100,000 people, in the pouring rain, on January 21 to protest against the government's legal reforms—will be doing its utmost to mobilize over those fears.⁵⁸

Netanyahu may be hoping that Republicans return to power in Washington and ease his predicament. But even if that were to happen, he'd first have to survive for another two years with Biden in the Oval Office. Until then, he'll have to withstand the backlash from disgruntled Likudniks and from the machinations of erstwhile allies marching Israel toward Jewish theocracy in the Land of Israel.⁵⁹ The compromises he'll be coerced into making will evoke comparisons to those which Kevin McCarthy proffered to hardline Republicans who, only then, after fourteen ballots, elected him as House speaker.⁶⁰

A more plausible script is that Netanyahu's emboldened partners—after having delivered for their voters or, alternatively, blamed a “weak” Netanyahu for their shortcomings—will seek to leverage their political advantage and force a preemptive return to the polls. Or that Netanyahu, if he succeeds in extricating himself from his criminal proceedings, will cast off his ornery associates and ask the electorate for a more commanding mandate to govern. Either way, it's hard to imagine the Netanyahu coalition enduring for four years in close quarters.

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