



## Israel's Political Scene Ahead of the Early Parliamentary Election

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*The coalition government in Israel has called an early parliamentary election. This decision led to numerous changes among the Israeli parties, with Likud, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's party, still leading the polls. Corruption charges against the PM will be the main political topic before the election. The electoral rivalry will also apply to foreign policy, presented by Netanyahu as an example of his effectiveness as PM.*

**Decision to Call the Election.** The election will take place on 9 April, as agreed by coalition leaders and following the self-dissolution bill which was passed by the Knesset on 26 December 2018. The official justification for the early election was the lack of compromise in the government regarding the bill on military service of the ultra-orthodox population. Netanyahu himself initiated the shortening of the parliamentary term, following reports that Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit is planning to indict the prime minister [on several charges of corruption](#) in the coming months.

By calling an early election (and contrary to the PM's earlier declarations, for example during the November cabinet crisis), Netanyahu will be able to regain the initiative in the face of the threat of indictment. His party's expected victory (polls indicate that Likud will retain about 30 out of 120 seats in parliament) will strengthen Netanyahu politically in the event of a possible lengthy lawsuit. The prime minister argues that decisions Mandelblit takes during the campaign will be an attempt to deliberately influence the election results, to blame him before a trial starts and leaving him with no opportunity to defend himself. Netanyahu has also announced that he will not resign office if indicted (he is not legally obliged to do so).

**The Election and the Political Scene.** Calling an early election caused changes which deepen Israeli party-political fragmentation. There was a split in one coalition party, The Jewish Home, which is associated with the settler movement. Popular leaders Naftali Bennett (education minister) Ayelet Shaked (justice minister) left to establish the New Right party. Their goal is to create an alternative for right-wing voters, less radical than the electorate of The Jewish Home. The Kulanu Party, headed by finance minister Moshe Kahlon, was weakened by the departure of a few MKs and falling support. Problems also affect religious parties in the coalition. Internal disputes may lead to the collapse of the United Torah Judaism (an alliance of orthodox parties), and a corruption investigation is being conducted against interior Minister Arie Deri, leader of the Shas Party.

The announcement of the early election led to the breakup of the main opposition force, the Zionist Union, which was an alliance of the left-wing Labour Party (headed by Avi Gabbay) and the centrist Hatnuah (headed by Tzipi Livni). Gabbay's sudden decision to cease cooperation (motivated by bad poll results and the conflict with Livni) was badly received within his party. A reshuffle is also taking place in the Joint List (an alliance of Arab parties), the importance of which is limited due to their traditional rejection of participation in the Israeli government. Another opposition party, Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid, maintains stable

support, although at a level much lower than that of Likud. Among the parliamentary parties, the electoral threshold (3.25%) would be passed by Yisrael Beiteinu (former Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman's party) and the left-wing party Meretz.

New centrist parties will participate in the election. Israel Resilience, the party created by Gen. Benjamin Gantz, the former chief of staff, has high support (at the level of over a dozen seats). Gesher is another party that could enter the Knesset. Its leader is Orly Levy (a former MK for Yisrael Beiteinu), who declares focus on economic and social issues. Telem was founded by the former Defence Minister Moshe Ja'alon, but polls indicate that this new party will not pass the threshold.

The fragmentation of the political scene and the rivalry for a similar electorate, especially on the right and in the centre, may lead parties to form electoral alliances and joint electoral lists, including with smaller non-parliamentary parties. This is likely because many groups (such as Yisrael Beiteinu and Hatnuah) are on the verge of the electoral threshold. Netanyahu described the current coalition as the foundation of the future government, and it is in his interests that many weak parties enter the Knesset. This would give him greater flexibility in building a coalition, and allow him to marginalise the most serious challengers, such as New Right and Gantz's party. It is unlikely that parties from the current opposition, categorised as a whole by Netanyahu as left-wing, will be invited to form a government.

**Themes of the Campaign.** The main themes of the campaign are allegations against Netanyahu. According to polls, over half of Israelis are in favour of his resignation in the event of indictment. At the same time, about 40% consider Netanyahu as the best candidate for PM. The opposition counts on a possible indictment, combined with the disclosure of some materials from the investigation, having an adverse effect on Netanyahu's reception in Israeli society. The leaders of the parties with the greatest potential to join a coalition government (The Jewish Home and New Right) avoid attacks on the prime minister regarding corruption. They focus on insufficient (in their opinion) actions in the area of security. Deterioration in this field, such as the failure of the truce with Hamas and the escalation of violence, would be a heavy burden for Netanyahu, who in November became the minister of defence. Inter-party competition for the electorate associated with the settler movement will translate into the escalation of promises regarding the future of Israeli settlements in the West Bank (for example, the annexation of some). Economic and social issues during the campaign will include relations between the religious and secular part of the population, and the high cost of living in Israel.

Foreign policy issues will play an important role in the election campaign. Netanyahu will seek to prove his political effectiveness by placing particular emphasis on his close relations with the leaders of major powers (including presidents Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin), cooperation with Arab states, fighting the presence of Iran in Syria, and the growing international recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. It is probable that high-level diplomatic initiatives will be undertaken during the campaign, for example, visits by friendly leaders (such as Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro), deepening relations with Muslim countries, and Netanyahu's participation in the [Middle East summit planned for February in Warsaw](#). The effectiveness of the government's foreign policy will be contested by the opposition. There may be accusations against Netanyahu concerning, for example, the deterioration of relations with the Jewish diaspora (especially in the U.S.) or the insipid attitude towards Central European states such as Hungary around historical issues. The issue of peace negotiations with the Palestinians will not resonate strongly during the campaign and the election will also mean the U.S. peace-plan announcement will be postponed.

**Prospects.** Netanyahu's electoral victory is likely, especially in the face of divisions among the opposition. However, if the coalition parties don't pass the electoral threshold, centrist political forces such as Gantz's party may be included in the future government, which could lead to changes in, for example, identity policy. Electoral success would strengthen Netanyahu's popular mandate while constituting a political and image-building argument against prosecutors, whose actions he represents as an undemocratic attempt to overthrow him. Victory for Netanyahu would also mean the continuation of cooperation and dialogue relations between Israel and Poland (including in the V4+ format).

Even if Netanyahu builds a safe parliamentary majority (about 65 seats), the coalition government will remain unstable in the face of continuing allegations and a potentially lengthy trial. Permanent political crisis around the head of the government would be an increasing burden for coalition partners and would be likely to lead to internal opposition in Likud. As a result, attempts could be made to force the prime minister's resignation, which would lead to yet another short parliamentary term and a further election.