



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM  
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

## Israel and Middle East News Update

*Friday, August 5*

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# News Excerpts

August 5, 2022

## I24 News

### **Lapid Briefs Officials on Gaza Security Situation**

Israel's Prime Minister [Yair Lapid](#) spoke with officials of the Israeli army's southern command and briefed them on the latest security developments in and around Gaza amid fears of a possible attack by militants from the Palestinian enclave. [The military](#) was still on high alert after closing roads near Gaza following the arrest of two senior [Palestinian Islamic Jihad \(PIJ\)](#) members in the West Bank city of Jenin earlier this week. Lapid "told the heads of authorities that he fully understands the damage caused to everyday life, but underlined that he would not allow the current situation to continue any longer," a statement from the prime minister's office said. "Israel is preparing for any scenario and will act if necessary against any organization that threatens the security of Israeli citizens," it added. [Dig Deeper "IDF Bolsters Troops on Gaza Border, as Lapid Vows Roads Won't Stay Closed for Long" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

## Ynet News

### **Border Closure May Force Gaza Power Plant Shutdown**

Gaza's only power station is at risk of imminent shutdown due to a lack of fuel, its manager warned as Israel's complete closure on the territory continued. Israel shut the goods and people crossings along its frontier with Gaza on Tuesday. [The military](#) has also imposed restrictions of movement on Israeli communities adjacent to the Gaza Strip. The rare measures have halted deliveries through Israel of diesel, which is needed to fuel Gaza's sole power plant. Gaza's 2.3 million residents experience regular power shortages and last week received only an average of 10 hours of electricity per day, according to data from the United Nation's humanitarian agency. Diesel for the power plant is usually trucked in from Egypt or Israel, which has maintained a blockade of the enclave since the militant group [Hammas](#) took control of Gaza in 2007. This week's measures have also prevented Gazans from leaving the territory.

## Times of Israel

### **Member of UN Gaza Probe: Sorry for 'Jewish Lobby' Remark**

[A UN investigator](#) apologized for using the term "Jewish lobby" and for questioning whether Israel should be a member of the UN, sparking Israeli accusations of antisemitism and calls for his resignation. Miloon Kothari, one of three members of a UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) investigating rights abuses in Israel and the Palestinian territories, triggered outrage after the interview with online publication [Mondoweiss](#), which came out on July 25. Asked about member states' criticisms of the commission, Kothari pointed to wider efforts to undermine the investigation. In a statement, the Israeli Foreign Ministry labeled Kothari's apology "a pathetic and unconvincing maneuver, which does not compensate for the long record of anti-Israeli and antisemitic statements made by him and the other COI members." Israel has flatly refused to cooperate with the commission.

## **JNF Allocates Funds to Buy Palestinian-Owned Land**

The Jewish National Fund (JNF) in Israel voted to allocate \$18 million to buy Palestinian-owned land in the West Bank at the request of the Israeli Defense Ministry. Israel declared the land – in the Jordan Valley – a closed military zone in 1969, barring its owners from using it. In the 1980s, Israel began allowing Jewish settlers to farm the land, which has since then been used to grow dates. In 2018, though, some of the land’s Palestinian owners petitioned Israel’s High Court of Justice to lift the military order and remove the settlers. It was also then that Israel’s Defense Ministry urged JNF, a Jerusalem-based Zionist institution, to buy a portion of the land from a Palestinian who claimed to own it. The purchase was delayed amid criticism of the NGO’s acquisition of land, but JNF sources said the ministry recently requested again for the organization to follow through with the transaction. [Dig Deeper “Palestinians Left in Tense Limbo by Israeli Expulsion Order” \(Associated Press\)](#)

### Ha’aretz

## **US Official: Israel May Not Meet Deadline for Visa Exemption**

A senior official at the United States embassy in Israel warned that the delay in voting on the approval of two laws might harm Israel's chances of joining its highly-coveted visa exemption program. The official stated that following the Knesset's approval of the laws, the US government would need nine to twelve months to evaluate the effectiveness of sharing passenger data between Israel, the airlines, and the Department of Homeland Security. The official made no comments regarding the political conflict in Israel surrounding the passage of the laws, but his remarks run counter to Likud's recent assertion that there is no problem with delaying the vote until March 2023, after the election, when [Benjamin Netanyahu](#), leader of the Likud, could form a new government and work to pass the legislation if elected. [Dig Deeper “US Embassy Urges Knesset to Expedite Legislation Needed for Visa Waiver” \(Ynet News\)](#)

### Israel Hayom

## **Israel Working on a Summit with Abraham Accords States**

Some two years after the signing of the Abraham Accords that saw Israel and four [Arab states](#) announce the normalization of relations, a summit of all signatories is in the works. According to the plan that Israel is currently drafting, the heads of state of each country would participate in the high-profile gathering that would take place in one of the five countries. Several months ago, Israel hosted the inaugural meeting of the Negev Forum, which saw the foreign ministers meet in Israel. But the new summit, if it takes place, will be as political as possible. Although Israel has yet to receive a confirmation on the participation from any of the other signatories, Israeli officials are proactively trying to secure a final date for the summit before the Knesset election on Nov. 1. Prime Minister Lapid, who has visited three of the four Arab countries as foreign minister in recent months, hopes to hold an official visit in Rabat in the coming weeks or months. [Dig Deeper “Israeli Police to Cooperate with Morocco to Track Down Escaped Criminals” \(I24 News\)](#)

## **US Urges Yemen's Houthis to Release Embassy, UN Staff**

Yemen's Houthi movement continues to hold 12 current and former employees of the US and UN, a US official said, calling on the group to release them in "a demonstration of good faith." The US said in November that the Houthis had detained several Yemeni staff at the US Embassy in the capital, Sanaa, without disclosing how many. UNESCO and UN Human Rights have said two staff members are being held. "We condemn the Houthi detention of 12 of our current and former US and UN staff. They're still being held incommunicado," US envoy for Yemen Tim Lenderking told reporters. The US mission in Sanaa has been closed since 2015 after the Houthis ousted Yemen's internationally recognized government from the capital in late 2014, prompting a Saudi Arabian-led military coalition to intervene months later. The movement, the de facto authority in north Yemen, has criticized Washington for "abandoning" local staff but has not commented on the detentions.

## **Iran Nuclear Talks Resume as Tehran Expands Enrichment**

Negotiators from Iran, the US, and the [European Union](#) resumed months-long indirect talks over Tehran's tattered [nuclear deal](#), even as international inspectors acknowledged the Islamic Republic had begun a new expansion of its uranium enrichment. The resumption of the Vienna talks suddenly called appears not to include high-level representation from all the countries part of Iran's 2015 deal with world powers. That comes as Western officials express growing skepticism over a deal to restore the accord, and the EU's top diplomat has warned that "the space for additional significant compromises has been exhausted." Iran's top negotiator, Ali Bagheri Kani, met with EU mediator Enrique Mora, Iranian media reported. As in other talks, the US won't directly negotiate with Iran. Instead, the two sides will speak through Mora. US Special Representative for Iran Rob Malley also was on hand, tweeting that "our expectations are in check." [Dig Deeper "Iran Now Speaking Openly on Nuclear Bomb Prospects" \(Associated Press\)](#)

## **Understanding the Ominous Rise of Israel's Most Notorious Ultra-Nationalist**

By Jeremy Sharon

- If you are a politician looking to bolster your man-of-the-people bona fides ahead of an election, you head to Jerusalem's Mahane Yehuda market to gladhand the shoppers and hawkers bustling about its stalls and alleyways. Last month, the market was host to pre-eminent far-right, ultra-nationalist MK Itamar Ben Gvir, a man convicted in the past of incitement to racial hatred and who, until recently, had a picture of a mass-murderer hanging in his living room. He was greeted with gusto. The crowd chanted his name and sang a lively ditty about Ben Gvir being the next prime minister. Numerous market patrons hugged, shook hands, and requested selfies with the far-right leader. Mahane Yehuda is a well-known bastion of right-wing sentiment, but until recently, a visit by Ben Gvir, 46, would have been little more than a minor curiosity.
- But just over a year after squeaking into the Knesset as part of Bezalel Smotrich's far-right Religious Zionism alliance, polls show Ben Gvir leading the party to a commanding Knesset position. It's only on the street, or in the shuk, though, that those numbers become real, each selfie a sign of how far to the right Israel's political pendulum appears to have swung. In 2019, at the beginning of Israel's apparently interminable political crisis, Ben Gvir's Otzma Yehudit party was still a political pariah. It was initially excluded from a union of right-wing, religious parties, Jewish Home and National Union, and faced another election in which it would likely fail to enter the Knesset.
- Fast forward three years, and that situation has now been upended. The Jewish Home party, the successor of the historic National Religious Party, has almost entirely collapsed and is no longer represented in the Knesset. The Yamina party, which inherited Jewish Home's more moderate right-wing voter base, was able to crown its leader Naftali Bennett prime minister for a year. But today, the party is itself facing political annihilation, driven by the government's decision to ally with the Arab Ra'am party and rudderless after Bennett decided to step away from politics.
- Meanwhile, Ben Gvir is flying high in the polls. Voters who fled Jewish Home and Yamina have seemingly recongregated as backers of Religious Zionism. The party regularly polls at ten seats or more, up from its current tally of six, though Israeli media polls are generally to be taken with a grain of salt. One particularly favorable poll for Ben Gvir conducted for Channel 13 News suggested that Religious Zionism would win 13 seats with Ben Gvir at the helm, three more than it would garner if Smotrich were to lead it into the November 1 elections. Such a result would make Religious Zionism, with its Jewish supremacists and far-right agitators, the third largest party in the country, according to the channel's polling results. Another poll conducted for Channel 12 and published last week put Otzma on seven seats and Religious Zionism on just four if the two parties ran separately.

- These polling figures demonstrate how Ben Gvir's ultra-nationalist outfit has gone from outcast to political asset in the space of less than one full Knesset term. Keenly aware of Ben Gvir's political tailwind, Smotrich has offered his colleague-cum-rival joint leadership of the united list in order to secure a unity agreement. Although disputes still persist between the two sides, it appears that a deal is imminent.
- A careful Kahanist: Ben Gvir's Otzma Yehudit party — the name translates to Jewish Power — is the ideological successor of the far-right and racist Kach party, which was founded and led by Rabbi Meir Kahane, who was assassinated in 1988 in New York. Kach advocated the removal of Arab citizens from the country and the establishment of a theocracy. It and its immediate splinter Kahane Chai were both blacklisted by Israel in 1994 after follower Baruch Goldstein massacred 29 Palestinians at prayer in the Cave of the Patriarchs. Ben Gvir insists that Otzma no longer advocates for the kind of racist and segregationist policies of Kach.
- But he also says his party identifies with Kach's ideology, and Otzma presents itself unabashedly as an ultra-nationalist, Jewish supremacist political outfit. Otzma advocates for the annexation of the entire West Bank, but without granting Palestinians Israeli citizenship; seeks to expel "disloyal" Arab citizens from Israel without defining how such a determination be made, and encourages Arab citizens, in general, to emigrate so as to make Israel more homogeneously Jewish.
- An Otzma party manifesto from the 2019 election campaign stated that it would "work to remove the enemies of Israel from our country." Ben Gvir has been vague as to what defines "an enemy." Baruch Marzel, a senior member of the party, said he believes "a majority" of Arab Israelis are enemies, although not all of them. Marzel was banned from running for Knesset by the Supreme Court in 2019 due to incitement to racism. The party also places a heavy focus on overhauling Israel's judicial system so that it emphasizes Jewish values over democratic values, especially in regard to minority rights.
- In recent years, Religious Zionism in its various incarnations has navigated to more extreme ideological waters while Otzma has toned down the overtly racist policies and rhetoric of its Kahanist predecessors, leaving both parties occupying similar political ground. But Otzma's more extremist ideological roots, especially regarding Jewish supremacy in Israel, lend it greater appeal to elements in Israeli society with overtly ethnonationalist beliefs. Its advocacy for Arab emigration and the expulsion of "disloyal" Arab citizens is something that Religious Zionism does not generally advocate or mention but gives Otzma traction among extremist elements of the electorate.
- Ben Gvir has in recent years been extremely wary of saying anything that might get him banned by the High Court from running for office. And the challenge of spreading his extremist ideology without slipping into hate speech was on display during his recent jaunt through Mahane Yehuda. As party supporters chanted "death to terrorists" — Ben Gvir and others on the more moderate right have pushed for installing capital punishment in terror cases — one acolyte cried out "death to Arabs" instead. The Otzma leader was unamused and vociferously told the renegade cheerleader to revert to the officially approved slogan.

- He later told Channel 12 news that it had been years since he had chanted “death to Arabs,” or pushed Kahane’s so-called “transfer” policy. “I’m no longer 16, 20, or 25... I was wrong when I generalized that all the Arabs should be expelled,” he told the network.
- **A serial provocateur:** Most Israelis were first introduced to Ben Gvir in 1995 when the 19-year-old extremist youth leader infamously ripped the Cadillac insignia from prime minister Yitzhak Rabin’s car. Showing off the booty, Ben Gvir boasted to a news camera: “We got the car. We’ll get to Rabin too.” Weeks later, Rabin was assassinated by a right-wing extremist. A lawyer who has made a career out of defending other right-wing extremists, Ben Gvir grew up in a religiously traditional but not strictly observant family in the middle-class town of Mevaseret Zion.
- In his maiden speech in Knesset last year, Ben Gvir outlined how his right-wing views began developing during his youth amid the First Intifada. He became a fervent opponent of the Oslo Accords and, after high school, studied at the Yeshiva of the Jewish Idea established by Kahane. These associations and his far-right activism led naturally to a political career with the far-right political factions, and in the 18th Knesset, he became a parliamentary aide to MK Michael Ben-Ari, who went on to found Otzma Yehudit’s predecessor Otzma LeYisrael in 2012. Ben Gvir became the de facto leader of the party in 2019 when Ben Ari and Marzel were banned from running for Knesset by the High Court. Ben Gvir himself has several criminal convictions to his name. In 2007, he was found guilty of incitement to racism and supporting a terror organization for holding signs at a protest reading “Expel the Arab enemy” and “Kahane was right,” a Jewish supremacist slogan endorsing Kach’s proposal to ethnically cleanse Israel of its Arab citizens.
- Until 2020, Ben Gvir had a picture of Jewish terrorist Goldstein hanging on his living room wall. He said he removed it in January 2020 when it became a political liability — Bennett had cited the picture as a reason for refusing a New Right-Otzma Yehudit merger. He has not disavowed his lionization of Goldstein, who was killed while carrying out the attack. Ben Gvir is also a serial provocateur and has made a habit of staging demonstrations in sensitive locations designed to antagonize Arab Israelis and Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem. Perhaps the most incendiary such incident was in early May 2021.
- As tensions in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah ramped up over the then-pending eviction of Palestinian families there, Ben Gvir inserted himself into the conflict by setting up a makeshift parliamentary office with fellow far-right provocateur Bentzi Gopstein, head of the racist Jewish supremacist organization Lehava. The office, a folding table, and some chairs under a pop-up canopy set up on a sidewalk was established opposite the location where protesters against the evictions had been meeting for nightly iftar meals, which break the day-long fast during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Ben Gvir and Gopstein brought far-right supporters to the area, and a riot was sparked, apparently when one of these activists sprayed what appeared to be pepper spray at the Palestinian iftar table. Intelligence officials warned that Hamas would fire rockets at Jerusalem if Ben Gvir did not leave, which he eventually did following pressure from then-prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

- Days later, Hamas did indeed fire rockets at Jerusalem in response to Sheikh Jarrah tensions and police actions on the Temple Mount (Haram Al-Sharif), setting off 11 days of intense fighting. During the fighting, police chief Kobi Shabtai accused Ben Gvir of abetting some of the worst inter-communal violence in Israel's history by bringing busloads of Lehava backers to cities with mixed Jewish-Arab populations, such as Lod, Ramle, and Acre, that saw some of the worst fighting during the riots. Ben Gvir has maintained his firebrand attitude since entering the Knesset, usually aiming his brickbats at Arab or left-wing lawmakers. In July 2021, Ben Gvir scuffled with Knesset guards when he was asked to be removed for calling Joint List MK Ahmad Tibi a terrorist. In October, he and the Joint List leader scuffled in a hospital hallway, and in June of this year, he and Tibi nearly came to blows inside the Knesset plenum.
- Aside from seeking to add the death penalty to Israel's penal code, Ben Gvir has also pursued judicial reform. The Otzma leader, together with other right-wing MKs, has twice brought a bill to a vote in the Knesset which would hand the government and Knesset total control over the selection process for Supreme Court judges, rather than also involving other justices and lawyers as is currently done. Right-wing Israelis have long seen the court as a bastion of leftism; by installing judges more friendly to right-wing causes, Otzma hopes to remake the court in its ideological image, placing Israel's Jewish character over its democratic values.
- Disaffected Mizrahim and ultra-Orthodox youth: There appear to be two main sources of voters who prefer Ben Gvir over Smotrich: Mizrahim and the ultra-Orthodox. Mizrahi Jews of Middle Eastern or North African descent skew in very general terms to the right of the political spectrum, and some are likely attracted to Otzma's chauvinistic nationalism, especially younger voters disillusioned with the status quo. The Channel 13 poll indicated that two of Religious Zionism's extra seats with Ben Gvir as party leader would come from the Likud, the historic party of traditional Mizrahi voters, many of whom come from working-class backgrounds and live away from the nation's economic center. Mizrahi youth "think no one takes them into account, don't have a voice, and don't think they'll be able to get on the property ladder or get a well-paying job," said Prof. Tamar Hermann, a senior research fellow at the Israel Democracy Institute.
- The disaffection makes a radical party headed by a charismatic leader espousing "almost revolutionary" ideals on an ultra-nationalist platform extremely attractive for such people, she added. There may also be an element of identity politics at play. Ben Gvir is himself a Mizrahi Jew who grew up in a religiously traditional family, which makes him more appealing and easier to connect with for the Mizrahi sector than Smotrich, who, like Likud leader Netanyahu, comes from European stock. Ben Gvir may also be pulling support from ultra-Orthodox youth, a large subset of whom have become increasingly nationalistic and ethnocentric, according to Moshe Hellinger, a senior lecturer in political science at Bar-Ilan University. The fact that Ben Gvir is very religious means that although voting for Otzma would constitute a rebellion from the usual instructions of the leading ultra-Orthodox rabbis to vote for ultra-Orthodox parties, they would still be voting for a religious party with Jewish theocratic values at its core.

- According to Hermann, the strongly-held belief in ultra-Orthodox society of the elevated status of the Jewish people as the chosen people fits neatly with Otzma's assertion of Jewish supremacy in Israel. Ben Gvir's charisma is also a draw, noted Yisroel Cohen, an ultra-Orthodox journalist, and commentator for the Kol Barama radio station. "There is a vibe and energy about him; he connects to the youth, he goes out onto the streets to meet people," said Cohen, noting that the politicians of the ultra-Orthodox parties are older and have less personal magnetism. Ben Gvir is also very responsive to personal requests from the general public for assistance on various matters and frequently responds directly to WhatsApp messages, including from young ultra-Orthodox men. This direct access increases his exposure and popularity among the ultra-Orthodox, Cohen said. After two recent terror attacks in ultra-Orthodox cities of Bnei Brak and Elad, Ben Gvir was swiftly on the scene, as he is after many terror attacks, while ultra-Orthodox MKs stayed away.
- A home for Yamina exiles: Even if headed by Smotrich, polls show Religious Zionism still garnering enough votes to be one of the largest Knesset parties, a dramatic rise for a party many politicians still consider beyond the pale. A good chunk of this support is thanks to the collapse of Yamina, and the consequent absence of a more moderate right-wing, religious, political option for some religious-Zionist voters. Yamina's entry into a government with Arab and left-wing parties tore the party asunder and alienated a substantial proportion of its voters, some of whom are now turning to Yamina's former partner on the far right. New Hope, led by nationalist Gideon Sa'ar, might have won some of those homeless voters, but the party instead leaned toward the center-left and allied with Benny Gantz's Blue and White.
- Beyond the political map itself, Herman noted that "chauvinistic nationalism" is on the rise in Israel in general. The percentage of Jewish Israelis who believe Jews should have greater rights in Israel than non-Jews has risen from 25% in 2015 to 42% in 2021, according to data from the Israel Democracy Institute's 2021 Democracy Index. This trend is especially marked among the ultra-Orthodox, religious-Zionist, and religiously traditional voters to whom Ben Gvir is appealing. The party may also be riding a swell of support thanks to the riots and violence between Jews and Arabs that rocked many mixed cities in May 2021, radicalizing parts of the Israeli right-wing, including traditional Mizrachi voters who populate many of the worst-hit towns. The riots, which included firebomb attacks on synagogues, homes, and businesses, likely gave a tailwind to Otzma's narrative of an implacably hostile Arab population.
- Ben Gvir was physically on the ground in Lod, Ramle, Acre, and other centers of unrest during the riots. He brought with him hundreds of activists from the far-right Jewish supremacist Lehava organization, run by former Otzma Knesset candidate Rabbi Bentzi Gopstein, to conduct counter protests. The inclusion of the Islamist Arab Ra'am party in the outgoing government may have been revolutionary, but it also gave Ben Gvir and others in the opposition ammunition to mercilessly attack the government for "relying on Arabs," both in Ra'am and the left-wing Meretz party.

- **Members of Ra'am and Meretz opposed the government's attempt to renew the so-called citizenship law, which prevents Palestinian spouses of Israeli citizens from gaining residency or citizenship in Israel. The MKs also helped block the renewal of a law guaranteeing Israeli civil rights for settlers in the West Bank, giving Ben Gvir the opportunity to claim that he had been correct about locking Arab parties out of the political process. In addition, Ben Gvir has been able to denounce right-wing parties such as Yamina and New Hope for having cooperated with Arab MKs, likely attracting some of their former voters. Aryeh Eldad, the former head of the defunct far-right Otzma LeYisrael party, Otzma Yehudit's predecessor, conjectured that right-wing voters who voted for Yamina and New Hope felt betrayed and are seeking to vote for a party that they know will never cooperate with Arab factions. Likud has attempted to hide its own dalliance with Ra'am — Netanyahu tried to woo the party after the 2021 election — but Eldad said voters would remember, and some Likud supporters could switch to Religious Zionism because of it.**
- **Thanks, Netanyahu: Just as Netanyahu's talks with Ra'am normalized allying with the party, allowing Bennett and Prime Minister Yair Lapid to court the Islamists, the former prime minister may have also paved the way for Ben Gvir's rise. In 2019, ahead of the first of the recent spate of five elections, Netanyahu worked tirelessly to bring the established religious-Zionist parties into a political union with Otzma, who even those hard-right parties had previously shunned. Netanyahu feared that right-wing voters would cast ballots for Ben Gvir, but because he stood little chance of crossing the threshold to enter the Knesset, those votes would end up in the wastebasket instead of bolstering the political right. At the time, Netanyahu promised the Jewish Home party two ministerial positions and reserved a spot on its electoral slate for a Jewish Home candidate.**
- **"Netanyahu made Ben Gvir mainstream; he gave him legitimacy; this was a very important step," said Hellinger. He also drew harsh criticism, including from the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, which called the merger "reprehensible." Netanyahu made the same kind of intervention in subsequent elections and, according to Hebrew media reports, has of late reprised his role as a matchmaker between Smotrich and Ben Gvir amid tensions between the two. In February 2021, after his latest intervention on behalf of Otzma, Netanyahu insisted that although he would have him in his coalition, Ben Gvir was "not fit" to be a minister. But with a potential 13 seats to Ben Gvir's name, voters in the upcoming election may disagree.**

## **Netanyahu's Rubik's Cube**

By Sima Kadmon

- The security situation in southern Israel is escalating, the Gaza periphery communities are on lockdown, and there have been protests against the cost of living, but probably none of that will distract the Likud MKs from the one thing on their minds that's consuming all their time these days: the race for a spot on the Knesset slate. Next Week, approximately 140,000 people will decide the contenders' place on the Likud slate in the party's internal election. However, the candidates' personal future is far less interesting than whether the Likud is about to change and remake itself in the image and likeness of its leader or whether the old Likud's remnants will be preserved nevertheless. Or, in other words: will the veteran party that once championed the lofty values of Jabotinsky's legacy become the party of Bibi-ism? In order to try to assess what the slate will look like, first, you have to understand what Netanyahu wants; or, more accurately, what he doesn't want. What he least wants is to have people on the slate who are likely to defect if they are made a sufficiently tempting offer.
- At his side, he wants people who are loyal to him personally, with whom he can steal proverbial horses, such as the French law [postponing prosecution of incumbents], which four rounds of elections have still failed to kill his desire to pass ("What? Of course not!"). The French law is the heart's desire of the defendant who has been indicted on three serious charges, and he thinks that passing it in the next Knesset is the perfect solution that will extricate himself from the legal predicament in which he's found himself. No wonder that in her weekend interviews, the new Zionist Spirit Chairwoman Ayelet Shaked formally announced that the party that she and Yoaz Hendel founded would not help pass the French law. Or, to paraphrase George Bernard Shaw: they're still haggling over whether or not to join a Netanyahu-led government, but the price—the French law—has already been established. But let's not be naïve.
- If Shaked becomes the 61st vote for Netanyahu in spite of her pledge to impose a broad unity government, she'll stomach the French law too. Netanyahu's demand for loyalty will raise the Likud faction's vocal Bibi-ists to the top slots. Their voices were silenced in the lead-up to the [general] election so as not to drive away the voters whom Netanyahu needs: moderate, stately right-wing voters who loathe Bibi-ism and shudder at partnering with Smotrich and Ben Gvir. Some of them returned to the Likud after the election and now are liable to vote for Benny Gantz and Gideon Saar, preventing Netanyahu from forming a government again. Netanyahu's base in the Likud, which includes Yariv Levin, Dudi Amsalem, Galit Distel Atbaryan, Amir Ohana, Shlomo Karhi, and Miri Regev will probably take its place in the top ten. The moderate, stately right that Netanyahu hopes to win over is no longer in the Likud in any case. Steinitz has resigned, Erdan isn't running, Saar is in another party together with Elkin, and there are some who made it to the top of the list last time, like Yuli Edelstein, who will find himself much lower this time after having fallen out of the [Netanyahu] family's good graces.

- It must be said that Netanyahu went far this time, too far, in his involvement in the election for the slate. Not openly, of course. After all, he doesn't concern himself with that. He did it through the Likud court, which took action against candidates who were not loyal to him personally and passed resolutions that significantly contributed to promoting Netanyahu's thugs and to changing the Likud's character. But the man whom Likud members have accused, more than anyone else, of influencing Netanyahu and his decisions (which, it must be said, have been contradictory) is Yariv Levin. The man who, behind his back, is nowadays called "the snake in glasses," is very close to Netanyahu and his wife. It was he who, in recent weeks, worked to persuade Netanyahu to take away power from the Likud Central Committee members and transfer it to the registered party members. To the outside, so say Likud members, he told everyone that he supported the Likud Central Committee members. Behind the curtains, he took action to disempower them. Likud members have said that Levin believes that he is the man who will replace Netanyahu. For some reason, the intelligent, gray, uncharismatic man with radical positions elicits fewer objections just because he doesn't fulminate. Last year he became very popular with the Bibi-ists because he's close to Netanyahu and because of his extreme statements about the justice system.
- It turns out that the servant who walks next to Caesar during the triumph and whispers to him *sic transit Gloria Mundi* (thus passes the glory of the world) so that he does not forget that he is a mere mortal wishes to be in charge himself. Like Sharon, who was one step ahead when Netanyahu announced that he was quitting politics and jettisoned his leadership of the Likud—that's probably how Levin imagines the process that will crown him as the next prime minister. [Whether because Netanyahu takes] a plea bargain, [or because of] the inability to form a government, those are likely to be reasons why Levin will demand to form a government himself. He'll say: after all, I was elected in first place in the internal election. Netanyahu is deeply worried about the possibility that convicted criminals will make it on the slate. Quite a few criminals have turned out to feel comfortable running in the Likud. Their party is their refuge. For example, Netanyahu does not want Dudu Laniado running in the internal election.
- Until yesterday it was known that Laniado was "only" convicted of breaking and entering. It just so happens that he was also convicted of assaulting a woman and resisting arrest, and lo and behold: the Likud Election Committee disqualified Laniado's candidacy. Another decision reflective of the wishes of the commander who, how ironic, really doesn't want to see convicted criminals on his slate. The slate that Netanyahu wishes he had is almost like a Rubik's cube: loyalists who will do anything for him on one side and a moderate, stately right wing on the other side. Not the people who fulminate, but types like Galant and Dichter. Dignified folks who will not embarrass the Likud. The third side would have people who are unlikely to pose a threat to him. The fourth side would have zero criminals. Now go find the algorithms that will produce those results.