

Netanyahu's Double Gamble¹

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Binyamin Netanyahu: warmongering in Washington

On December 2 2014 Israel's prime minister, Binyamin (Bibi) Netanyahu, sacked two of his senior cabinet ministers and coalition partners - finance minister Yair Lapid and justice minister Tzipi Livni - thereby forcing the dissolution of Israel's parliament, the Knesset, long before the end of its term.¹ Elections for a new Knesset have been set for March 17.

The two sacked ministers belong (in Israeli terms) to centrist parties, which are therefore on the left of Netanyahu and his other coalition partners, all of whom belong to the extreme right and the ultra-extreme right.

Foreign

There were several political differences that led to the crisis, but the most important cause was Netanyahu's flagrant confrontational stance towards Barack Obama's US administration and his open alliance with the US Republican right against the White House. This is a marked departure from the long-standing norm in Israel-US relations, whereby Israel avoided openly taking sides in the party politics of its chief protector and sponsor, and relied on US bipartisan support.

Thus Netanyahu has abandoned Israel's traditional strategy of accommodating American presidential pretence of managing an Israeli-Palestinian 'peace process' aimed at a 'two-state solution'. Whereas more cautious Israeli leaders kept up the charade and made sure that the sham process would go on and on but lead nowhere, Netanyahu brazenly burst the hot-air balloon in the face of the exasperated secretary of state, John Kerry.²

An even more explosive issue is Iran. While the Obama administration is keen to cut some kind of deal with the Islamic Republic, Netanyahu is single-mindedly engaged in warmongering. His real motivation is not fear of an Iranian nuke that would obliterate Israel: this tall tale is spread by dishonest spin-doctors and believed by fools.³ In fact, the Mossad (Israel's counterpart of MI6 and the CIA) does not believe this, as has been made clear by recent helpful leaks.⁴

What lies behind Netanyahu's war-lust is worry that a US-Iran deal may undermine Israel's total regional hegemony under America's franchise. He may also hope that a regional conflagration can provide an opportunity for massive ethnic cleansing of Palestinian Arabs from territories occupied by Israel. I explored these motives in some detail in a *Weekly Worker* article three years ago.⁵

¹ From <http://www.israeli-occupation.org/2015-03-08/moshe-machover-netanyahus-double-gamble/>

What occasioned the recent leaks was Netanyahu's impending impudent appearance before the US congress to preach his gospel of war. The leakers in Tel-Aviv or Washington (or both) evidently wished to sabotage Netanyahu's sermon. They are horrified by its anticipated nasty, dangerous and dishonest message, as well as by the impertinent protocol-breaching way in which the visit had been arranged behind Obama's back by the Republican speaker of the House, John Boehner, and Netanyahu's man, Israel's American-born ambassador to Washington, Ron Dermer.⁶

In abandoning Israel's traditional bipartisan relationship with both US Democrats and Republicans, and openly antagonising Obama, his administration and at least some of his party, Netanyahu is taking a big gamble. Among the risks is the possible alienation of many American Jews. He may please Sheldon Adelson, who is (appropriately) a gambling business magnate and a major donor to the Republican Party, as well as financing a freebie Israeli daily newspaper that functions as Netanyahu's propaganda sheet. But Adelson's rightwing Republican politics is by no means shared by most American Jews, who overwhelmingly vote for the Democrats. Indeed, it has been pointed out that many more Jews voted for Obama (in America) than for Netanyahu (in Israel).

Dennis Ross is an ardent Zionist and veteran US diplomat, having served as dishonest broker in the endless 'peace process' under two Republican and two Democrat presidents. Interviewed by *Ha'aretz* editor-in-chief Aluf Benn, he urged Bibi to draw back: "Netanyahu should admit [his] decision to address Congress was a mistake." Meir Dagan, former Mossad chief, was even more scathing: "The person causing the most strategic harm to Israel on the Iranian issue is the prime minister."⁷

Meantime an unprecedented war of words has erupted between the Obama administration and Netanyahu. On February 18 Reuters reported: "US accuses Israel of inaccurate leaks on Iran nuclear talks." White House spokesman Josh Earnest is quoted as saying, "We see that there is a continued practice of cherry-picking specific pieces of information and using them out of context to distort the negotiating position of the United States."⁸ And secretary of state John Kerry, in a barely veiled swipe at Netanyahu, observed that "critics of an emerging nuclear deal with Iran did not know what they were talking about".⁹

For their part, Netanyahu's election spin-doctors came up with an ad and video hostile to the White House: "If Israel listened to the United States, it wouldn't exist".¹⁰

Netanyahu's major foreign-policy bet seems to be based on the assumption that Obama is a dead man walking and the ascendancy of the Republican right is irreversible. How this wager will work out for Netanyahu (and for Israel) remains to be seen. Its consequences will take time to unfold.

Domestic

In breaking up his ruling coalition, Netanyahu also made a short-term electoral calculation. His Likud party entered the present Knesset in February 2013 in a united bloc with Yisrael Beitenu ('Israel Our Home') led by the

thuggish Avigdor Lieberman. The bloc won 31 seats, and was by far the largest party in the 120-seat Knesset. The second largest party was Yair Lapid's centrist Yesh Atid ('There is a Future'), with 19 seats. But in July 2014 the bloc split. Lieberman's party remained in the coalition, but now controlled 11 of the 31 seats, leaving Netanyahu's Likud with 20. Subsequent resignations changed the balance further, giving Lieberman's party 13 seats and Netanyahu's only 18. The latter assumed, based on December opinion trends, that a new election would give the Likud considerably more than 18 seats.

So far, he seems to have been right, in that all recent opinion polls indicate that the Likud will get at least 22 seats. But this may not be enough. At the time of writing, the Likud is running virtually neck and neck with the Zionist Union, a bloc of the centrist Hatnuah ('The Movement') led by Tzipi Livni and the centre-leftish Labour led by Yitzhak Herzog. Some polls give the latter bloc a slight edge. Moreover, last-minute shifts are always possible, although recent revelations of Netanyahu's misappropriation of public funds to pay for his lavish private lifestyle have so far done him little damage in the polls.¹¹

But, even assuming that the Likud gets more votes than the Zionist Union, Bibi may have difficulty in finding partners for a new coalition. He is unlikely to enlist those whom he has just sacked from the old coalition, or any other party that is opposed to his new line in foreign policy. This rules out the Zionist Union and Yesh Atid (predicted to win about 12 seats, seven down from its present 19). It also rules out Meretz, the vestigial fag-end of the Zionist left (predicted five seats, down from six).

Another complication, which may prevent Netanyahu heading a government even if the Likud wins a plurality of seats, is the formation of a joint electoral list comprising Hadash (a front of Rakah, the 'official communist' party), two secular Arab nationalist parties and an Islamic party. This grouping, which is sometimes referred to as the 'Joint Arab List' - although one of its highly placed candidates is Dov Khenin, a Hebrew member of the Rakah-Hadash leadership - may increase the representation of anti-Zionists in the Knesset.

The background to the formation of the joint list is ironic. Israel operates a system of proportional representation, whereby each list of candidates (presented by a party or a bloc of parties) gets a number of seats very nearly proportional to the number of votes cast for it. However, in order to get any seat at all, a list has to get votes above a certain threshold. Until 1992 the threshold was very low: 1% of the total. It was subsequently raised to 1.5% and then, in 2004, to 2%. But in March 2014 it was raised again to an all-time high of 3.25%. This was clearly aimed at Hadash and the Arab parties: at present Hadash and a bloc of two Arab parties have four seats each, and a third Arab party, Balad, has three. Among the three Balad MKs is Haneen Zoabi, a feisty, courageous parliamentarian, whom the Zionist politicians love to hate. In fact, they tried unsuccessfully to prevent her personally from running for the new Knesset.¹²

At any rate, the new 3.25% threshold, which was designed to reduce the number of anti-Zionist and especially Arab MKs, is almost certain to have the opposite effect, by virtually forcing the four parties to form their joint list, as a move of self-preservation. This is indeed a tactical exercise: the four parties

will keep their separate organisations and remain politically independent. Polls indicate that the joint list will get at least 12 seats, one more than the four components have at present. It is quite possible that the formation of the joint list will induce a greater participation of Arab voters than in the past. In the last election the participation of Arab voters was only 56%, which is very low by Israeli standards. It is now expected that over 62% of the eligible Arab voters will participate in the forthcoming elections. Depending on the final results, and on the number of seats gained by other parties, the joint list may be in a position to keep Netanyahu out of office.

It is also possible that the joint list will attract some additional Hebrew protest votes. A noteworthy recent recruit to Hadash is Avraham Burg, a religious Jew who is a former speaker of the Knesset and chairman of the Jewish Agency and the World Zionist Organisation. Over the years he has undergone radicalisation, and in 2003 he published an article declaring that Zionism must be laid to rest.¹³

Although the components of the joint list remain separate parties, they had to publish a joint election manifesto. It is a brief document consisting of seven points. It comes out in favour of the 'two-state solution' and a just resolution of the problem of the Palestinian refugees, ensuring their right of return. For Israel's Palestinian Arab citizens it demands equal individual rights as well as collective rights and autonomy as a national minority, part of the Arab nation. In its democratic and socio-economic demands the manifesto is broadly left-reformist social-democratic (and thus considerably to the left of the British Labour Party).

However, Palestinian Arab feminists have pointed out that the platform's demands for equal rights for women, etc is somehow inconsistent with the fact that two of the joint list candidates, both likely to be elected, are openly polygamous. One of them belongs to the Islamic party; the other, believe it or not, is standing for the 'official communist' party, Rakah-Hadash.¹⁴

5th March 2015

Notes

1. The Knesset is elected for a term of four years. The last elections were held on January 22 2013.
2. See my article, 'Quest for legitimacy' (*Weekly Worker* September 18 2014).
3. In one of these categories we must include comrade Sean Matgamna, misleader of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty. See his articles, 'What if Israel bombs Iran?' July 28 2008 (www.workersliberty.org/story/2008/07/28/what-if-israel-bombs-iran-discussion-article); 'Israel, Iran and socialism', September 11 2008 (www.workersliberty.org/story/2008/09/10/israel-iran-and-socialism-sean-matgamna-replies-moshe-machover); and my respective replies: 'Abominable warmongering on the left' (*Weekly Worker* August 28 2008); 'Propaganda and sordid reality' (*Weekly Worker* September 18 2008).
4. See 'Leaked cables show Netanyahu's Iran bomb claim contradicted by Mossad' *The Guardian* February 23 2015.

5. 'Netanyahu's war wish' *Weekly Worker* February 9 2012.
6. See 'White House says Benjamin Netanyahu's surprise trip to US is a breach of protocol' *The Daily Telegraph* February 25 2015.
7. Ross reported by *Ha'aretz* February 17 2015. The Ross interview is on YouTube and is worth watching: <http://youtu.be/PEuxDkpo5uw>. 'Former Mossad head urges Israeli voters to oust Binyamin Netanyahu' *The Guardian* February 27 2015.
8. See www.reuters.com/article/2015/02/18/us-usa-iran-whitehouse-idUSKBN0LM1ZH20150218.
9. *Daily Mail* February 24 2015.
10. For details see www.buzzfeed.com/sheerafrenkel/netanyahus-new-campaign-ad-if-israel-listened-to-the-united#.cnDPoOjNeQ.
11. 'Binyamin Netanyahu faces damning expenses accusations ahead of elections' *The Guardian* February 17 2015.
12. See report on her case: <http://us4.campaign-archive2.com/?u=4c0bb759968fd1dcd47869809&id=e0a37b9fda&e=0455bda52e>.
13. 'The end of Zionism' *The Guardian* September 15 2003.
14. I Abu-Sharb and R Shalabnah-Bahuti, 'Beware, polygamous candidates' (Hebrew) *Ha'aretz* February 9 2015.