What's the Deal with the New Israeli Government?

INTRODUCTION

On June 13, the Israeli Knesset (parliament) swore in its 36th government, a fragile coalition of ideologically diverse parties and politicians, including a new prime minister, Naftali Bennett. The new government was formed after extensive negotiations and came as a result of the March 2021 general election — the fourth such election in two years.
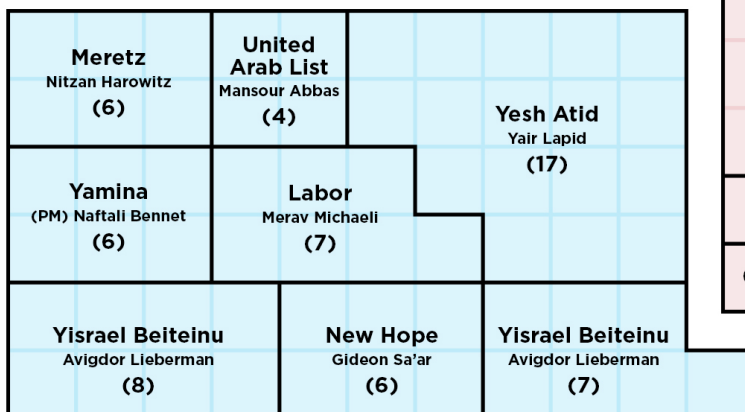
BACKGROUND

Israel is a multiparty parliamentary democracy, in which multiple parties form coalitions to build a government. The Knesset is a unicameral legislative body with 120 seats — one of which is held by the Prime Minister, the head of government, who is usually the leader of the largest party in the coalition. Rather than vote for individual candidates, Israeli parties create an ordered list of candidates and then voters select a party based on its platform. Israel has proportional representation with a threshold of 3.25%, meaning that the number of seats in the Knesset a party gets is directly proportional to that party's share of the total number of votes cast, as long as the party wins at least 3.25% of the total. After elections, the leader of the largest party is typically given the mandate to form a government by assembling a majority coalition of at least 61 seats. If the leader of the largest party fails to form a government within a certain period of time, the mandate is generally handed to the leader of the second-largest party. Elections are automatically triggered if no party leader can get 61 members to agree to a coalition. The parties that are not in the coalition are typically referred to as the opposition.

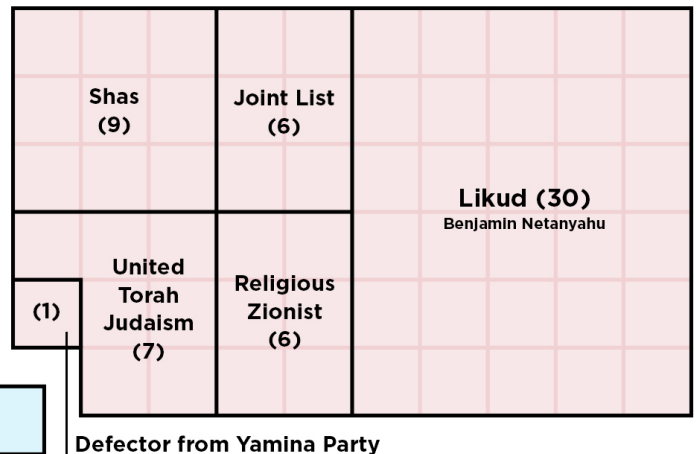## WHAT IS DIFFERENT ABOUT THIS GOVERNMENT COALITION?

The March 2021 election was held after a unity government between then-Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's right-wing Likud party and Benny Gantz's centrist Blue and White party fell apart last year.

24th Israeli Knesset

NEW COALITION GOVERNMENT (61)

Meretz
Nitzan Harowitz
(6)

United Arab List
Mansour Abbas
(4)

Yesh Atid
Yair Lapid
(17)

Yamina
(PM) Naftali Bennet
(6)

Labor
Merav Michaeli
(7)

Yisrael Beiteinu
Avigdor Lieberman
(8)

New Hope
Gideon Sa'ar
(6)

Yisrael Beiteinu
Avigdor Lieberman
(7)

OPPOSITION (59)

Shas
(9)

Joint List
(6)

Likud (30)
Benjamin Netanyahu

(1)

United Torah Judaism
(7)

Religious Zionist
(6)

Defector from Yamina Party

While Likud again won the most seats in the most recent election, Netanyahu was unable to form a coalition. Yair Lapid, head of the centrist Yesh Atid party, was then tasked with forming a government. Lapid successfully pieced together a partnership between right-wing parties like Naftali Bennett's Yamina and Gideon Sa'ar's New Hope, as well as the left-leaning Labor and Meretz parties, in addition to an Arab party, Ra'am — all of whom shared a common goal of removing Netanyahu as Prime Minister. In the new rotational government, Bennett — whose party only holds six seats in the current Knesset, but whose support enabled the new government to come into being — will serve as the Prime Minister for two years, before Lapid, now Foreign Minister, steps in as Prime Minister for the remaining two.

WHAT TO EXPECT ON POLICY

Given the diverse range of party ideologies in the new government, the new government will likely concern itself with areas of common ground. The coalition has announced its intention to focus on improving infrastructure like the national railway, building new hospitals in Israel's "periphery" (the towns in the North and South removed from the central cities of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem), and revamping the education system. Both initiatives associated with Israel's left wing, like progress toward a two-state solution, and those associated with the right, like wide-scale settlement expansion, are unlikely to advance due to the delicate balance of power between right-wing and left-wing parties.

NOTABLE FIGURES

Naftali Bennett: The son of American immigrants, Bennett moved from the start-up tech space to Israeli politics. A religious nationalist who has publicly supported settlement expansion and has a hawkish reputation, he is nevertheless expected to strike a pragmatic note as Israel's 13th Prime Minister.

Yair Lapid: Head of the Yesh Atid party, Lapid serves as Alternate Prime Minister and Foreign Minister. Lapid, the architect of the new coalition, organized the agreement between the eight parties involved. He was previously a popular journalist. After founding Yesh Atid, Lapid served as Finance Minister in a previous Netanyahu-led government.

Mansour Abbas: Mansour Abbas is the leader of an Islamist Arab Party called Ra'am, which became the first Arab party to play such a significant role in the formation of a government. Abbas is mainly concerned with improving the welfare of Arab Israelis and will push for increased investment in Arab communities.

Benjamin Netanyahu: Benjamin Netanyahu is Israel's longest-serving Prime Minister, having held the title for 12 consecutive years. He now serves as the Leader of the Opposition in the Knesset. He has vowed to return swiftly as PM, but also faces the ongoing challenge of defending himself from corruption charges.

Isaac Herzog: Every seven years, Knesset members elect a new President of Israel. While the president's role is largely ceremonial, the head of state plays a prominent role in the process of forming a government, representing Israel to the world, and granting pardons. President Reuven Rivlin will finish his seven-year term as president next month and the Knesset recently elected Isaac Herzog — a former government minister and Labor Party leader and current Chairman of The Jewish Agency for Israel — as his successor.

Knesset by the Numbers:
- 61 members of the coalition
- 8 parties in the coalition
- 24th Knesset since 1948
- 9 female ministers
- 1st Arab party in governing coalition