

Israel Election Results: Netanyahu Announces Thursday Meeting With Lieberman as Unity Talks With Gantz in Deadlock



Yisrael Beiteinu Chairman Avigdor Lieberman at a press conference in the moshav of Yad HaShmona, Israel, September 2019. Credit: Olivier Fitoussi

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Yisrael Beiteinu Chairman Avigdor Lieberman have agreed to meet on Thursday amid talks on a national unity government, hours after Benny Gantz's Kahol Lavan party shunned a meeting with Likud's negotiation team.

As Likud-Kahol Lavan talks appear to be deadlocked, Netanyahu told Lieberman, "There is no point in wasting Israel's time. We'll meet and decide [how to proceed] if we see [intentions are] serious."

During a Wednesday meeting between representatives of right-wing parties Likud, United Torah Judaism, Shas and Yamina, Yamina MK and Transportation Minister Bezalel Smotrich offered to give up a ministerial portfolio in the next government to ensure that Lieberman joins a Netanyahu-led coalition.

Smotrich made his suggestion after Lieberman clarified that he would not join a "messianic" right-wing government. According to a source who was present at the meeting, Smotrich's expressions suggested that he was prepared to sacrifice his position to allow Kahol Lavan to join the government as well. Smotrich declined to comment on the matter.

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Sources who attended the meeting also said party leaders refused to sign a document presented by Likud's Zeev Elkin that would commit them to endorsing Netanyahu as prime minister in the case that current coalition talks and a potential second-round fail, arguing it was "unnecessary at this point in time."

If Netanyahu fails to form a coalition by a late October deadline or decides to return the mandate beforehand, President Reuven Rivlin may tap another candidate to try and form one. If that second candidate also fails, Rivlin would then allow a group of at least 61 lawmakers to present another candidate beyond the two forerunners, which is when Elkin would present such a document.

Netanyahu and Lieberman are slated to meet on Thursday at 9:30 A.M.

Lieberman confirmed the meeting, stressing he will push to "establish a unity government with the three parties: Yisrael Beiteinu, Likud, and Kahol Lavan."

In addition, Lieberman said his party made its position clear before, during and after the September election, stating it won't join any other government.

Lieberman's unrelenting stance on religion-and-state issues led to Netanyahu's failure to secure a ruling coalition following the April 9 election, which resulted in the dissolution of the Knesset and a do-over election within six months. In the September campaign, Lieberman has insisted that he will only support a government without the ultra-Orthodox parties, which Netanyahu calls "natural partners."

Netanyahu and Lieberman have been at odds since the Knesset voted to disband itself in May after Yisrael Beiteinu chairman refused to back down on the issue of drafting ultra-Orthodox yeshiva students, while ultra-Orthodox parties claimed they have already yielded enough ground.

Netanyahu bashed Lieberman, saying he misled his voters while dragging the entire country into a new election. Netanyahu also called Lieberman a leftist: “he brings down right-wing governments.”

Earlier on Wednesday, Lieberman announced that his party would join negotiations between Netanyahu’s Likud and Kahol Lavan if no breakthrough is achieved in talks to form a unity government by Yom Kippur, marked on Tuesday.

Lieberman urged Likud and Kahol Lavan during the September election campaign that the two parties form a unity government. Nevertheless, Yisrael Beiteinu hasn’t taken any action to bridge the gaps between Kahol Lavan and Likud since the election.

During his meeting on Wednesday with Yisrael Beiteinu staffers, Lieberman said he would hold informal talks with the leaders of Likud and Kahol Lavan on Thursday when the newly elected members of the 22nd Knesset will be sworn in.

Lieberman added that he hopes that “Likud and Kahol Lavan could make much more progress than what we’ve seen so far,” stressing that that last thing that Israel needs is a new election,” and that no significant political shifts are expected should a third election be held.

“We must reach a wise solution and leave all personal considerations and egos aside. In any case, we’ll enter high gear after Yom Kippur in an effort to form the new government.”

It remains unclear what is the outline Lieberman’s party will attempt to advance after it made clear — in contrast to Kahol Lavan’s stance — that it’s not against Netanyahu serving as prime minister under indictment. On the other hand, Yisrael Beiteinu committed to passing the draft law as well as additional laws in a bid to change the religious status quo in Israel, a move that will be rejected by ultra-Orthodox parties Shas, United Torah Judaism, and far-right alliance Yamina — Netanyahu’s right-wing bloc partners.

Last week Lieberman criticized Netanyahu, expressing hope that the prime minister demonstrates flexibility during negotiations with Kahol Lavan.

Taking to Facebook, Lieberman wrote that Netanyahu must “Stop your game of assigning the blame for a third round of elections, and perhaps we’ll hear even

before Rosh Hashanah that we have a government, at least in principle,” adding that “history has proven that when Bibi wants to he can be the most flexible man in the world.”



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