

Israel's government collapses — again. So, what now?

For the fifth time in four years, Israelis will return to the ballot box to vote for a new government. There is little indication that the next election will have a definitive result. Israelis may have to endure repeated elections beyond 2022 simply to get a slim majority to form a coalition government — and that has ramifications for the Middle East and U.S. interests.

Israel is plagued by an electoral system that gives disproportionate influence to small parties, which usually are needed to get to the minimum threshold of 61 Knesset members to form a government. Perhaps it wouldn't be so unfortunate if Israel didn't have to deal with aggression by Iran and its proxy, Hamas. As Anna Ahronheim writes in the *Jerusalem Post*, "Israel cannot have both security and political instability. Israel's enemies, be it in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, or the West Bank, are wide awake looking for an opportunity to strike."

Israel's behind-the-scenes wars with Iran in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, and with Palestinian terrorists in the West Bank, are off the radar for most Americans. In the north, Israel has been conducting the "War Between the Wars" to thwart Iranian entrenchment in Syria, stop the transfer of game-changing, precision-guided weapons and drones, and target Iranian-supported missile and drone factories. These operations potentially could spin out of control with a miscalculation, causing regional instability that affects American security interests.

With the resurgence of Hamas-instigated terror operations in the West Bank, Israel has been preemptively conducting its "Break the Wave" operation to counter terrorist activity. But Hamas may see this time of Israeli political uncertainty as an opportunity to increase its attacks.

The political chaos is unfolding as President Biden plans to visit Israel in July. A few days ago, he thought he would be meeting with Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, but now he likely will be meeting with foreign minister Yair Lapid as Bennett's replacement. There is even a possibility that Defense Minister Benny Gantz could defect from the current coalition, swallow hard and rejoin former

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, with whom he had a falling out, in a new government to avoid elections. Biden has said that his mid-July trip to Saudi Arabia and Israel will be an attempt to bring “more stability and peace to the Middle East.”

Bennett comes from the Israeli right and Lapid from the center-left. The expectation is that Lapid may be more accepting of the Biden administration’s requests regarding the Palestinian Authority, the “two states for two peoples” solution, limiting settlement expansion, and America’s desire to reopen a Palestinian consulate in Jerusalem. However, the Israeli electorate has leaned right since the Second Intifada, which began in September 2000, and likely would see such concessions as a betrayal. Most Israelis view the Palestinian Authority as a corrupt, unreliable partner, with a history of fomenting anti-Semitic ideology in textbooks, mosques and media. If Lapid makes concessions, he could be savaged by Israeli media and political opponents.

The good news is that Israel’s military and security apparatus is apolitical and has decades of experience coordinating its tactical operations with the United States, even when its government has interim leadership. However, on a more significant geostrategic level, it is hard to make major decisions when you are a temporary prime minister. Israel’s moderate allies — the Gulf states, Egypt and Jordan — who are developing an American-initiated defense plan with Israel in response to Iran’s escalation, most assuredly would feel better if Israel’s political system were more stable.

The messy Israeli democracy is hard for authoritarians to understand. To advance American policy interests, we need the Arab nations to deepen their relationships with Israel — as some have done with the Abraham Accords — as a counterweight to Iranian expansionism.

As Dan Shapiro, former U.S. ambassador to Israel, points out, U.S. officials “are used to conducting relations with Israel during political crises and election campaigns. The main principle is: Don’t interfere while Israel’s domestic political processes play out. Most normal business, particularly in security cooperation, can continue. While a minority government in Israel is fully empowered, in the case of elections, there may be some decisions a transition government in Israel cannot make.”

The Biden administration reportedly is still trying to salvage an Iran nuclear deal — a reworking of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) forged under President Obama — and is keeping Israel abreast of the negotiations. However, Lapid's political weakness may force him to take a tougher line with the U.S. Iran, as an enemy to the U.S., Israel and the West in general, seems in no hurry to rejoin the deal now, while U.S. sanctions against it are not fully enforced and the Iranian economy can stay afloat by selling oil to China — though competition with Russian oil exports recently has stepped up.

Without secondary sanctions levied against China, Iran can continue to play hardball and undermine U.S. regional interests. Iran interpreted the U.S. not fully enforcing its sanctions not as a conciliatory gesture but as American weakness to be exploited. Expect Lapid or any Israeli prime minister to ask the U.S. to increase sanctions if Iran continues to develop its nuclear weapons program.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) recently sanctioned Iran because it refuses to explain uranium found in undeclared nuclear sites, and Iran has removed cameras that were monitoring its nuclear facilities. If Iran reneges on its nuclear program commitments, only snap-back sanctions, as promised in the JCPOA, could possibly pressure Iran to change its behavior. Iran knows that America has no credible military threat, making the Iranians more stubborn in negotiations.

There is broad support across the Israeli political spectrum for confronting Iran if it crosses the nuclear threshold — and it will be challenging for the Biden administration if Israel moves towards a significant military response.

American interests are also affected by Israel's new confrontation with Russia in Syria. Until recently, Israel coordinated its air campaign against Iranian interests in Syria with Russia to avoid any Israeli-Russian conflict. Russia was working with Israel because it was in Russia's interest to suppress Iranian entrenchment in Syria, since that could threaten Syrian stability. Last week, however, Israel bombed the Damascus Airport where Iran was transiting weapons, infuriating Russia. Taken to the worst extreme, this could escalate to an Israeli attack on Russian anti-missile systems if they were to be used against Israel, setting the region on fire. And with America's plate full with the Russia-Ukraine war, the last thing Washington needs is a kinetic conflict between its primary ally in the Middle East and the Russian bear.

The U.S.-Israel relationship will survive this political melodrama; the two democracies have navigated through similar challenges before and continued to coordinate their joint security approach to the region. But the situation is not ideal, by far — especially if an interim Israeli prime minister must make a significant decision that affects American national security interests in the coming months.

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