

DESPITE ISRAELI POLITICAL SHAKE-UP, BIBI REMAINS ON  
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[Announcement of Early Israeli Elections Leads to Political Frenzy: Manfred Gerstenfeld, \*Tundra Tabloids\*, Jan. 3, 2019](#)— On December 24, 2018, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the parties in his coalition decided to disperse the Knesset.

[Five Questions About Israel's Political Musical Chairs: Jonathan S. Tobin, \*JNS\*, Jan. 4, 2018](#)— The old expression is that for every two Jews, there are three political opinions.

[Why Should Israelis Vote if their Vote is Meaningless?: Caroline B. Glick, \*Jerusalem Post\*, Dec. 27, 2018](#)— In a recent conversation with a European ambassador, I asked about the possible consequences of the elections to the European parliament, which are scheduled to take place in May 2019.

[A Crystal Ball on 2019: David M. Weinberg, \*Israel Hayom\*, Jan. 4, 2018](#) — The peril of predicting political and diplomatic developments has been made crystal clear over the past topsy-turvy week.

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ANNOUNCEMENT OF EARLY ISRAELI

ELECTIONS LEADS TO POLITICAL FRENZY

*Manfred Gerstenfeld*

[\*Tundra Tabloids\*, Jan. 3, 2018](#)

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**On December 24, 2018, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the parties in his coalition decided to disperse the Knesset. They announced that elections for the 21st Knesset would be advanced from November 2019 to April 9, 2019. Two days later the Knesset approved this. It had been increasingly impossible for Netanyahu's 61 MK coalition to function properly after the five member faction of the Israel is Our Home (Yisrael Beiteinu) party decided to leave the coalition on 14 November 2018 preceded by the resignation of its leader Avigdor Lieberman as Minister of Defense.**

**Within a few days, a pandemonium of announcements and rumors followed. Former IDF chief of staff, Benny Gantz has founded a new party named Israel Resilience (Chosen L'Israel). Gantz' detailed political views are unclear. He has said that he could be "right-wing on security issues, left-wing on socioeconomic issues and liberal on economic goals." Recent polls give his new party between 13-15 seats.**

**It remains also unclear who the candidates of his party will be. A few names have been mentioned in the media. One of these, Brig. General Professor Yitshak Kreiss, a former IDF chief medical officer, now a senior director of the Sheba Medical Center, has denied that he will run for the Knesset. There are rumors that former Chief of Staff and former Likud Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon will join Gantz' list. Ya'alon who left the Likud and the Knesset has a clear right of center position on security issues. At this point it seems that Gantz' list will run alone in the elections, though he is being courted by other parties to join forces.**

**One of the many rumors is that Zionist Union leader Avi Gabbay had offered Gantz the top spot of his list in the upcoming elections and that he had turned this down. Gantz running with his own list alone will heavily affect the prospects of the There is a Future party (Yesh Atid), led by Yair Lapid. In earlier polls this party was considered the main opponent to Netanyahu's Likud. Recent polls give it around the same 11 seats as it holds in the current Knesset.**

**When advanced elections were announced Gabbay declared that the choice for Prime Minister would be between Netanyahu and himself. Yet, all polls at the time indicated that if Gabbay were to head the Zionist Union list it would lose at least half of the 24 seats it received in the 2015 elections under the leadership of his predecessor, Yitzchak Herzog. On January 1, 2019, Gabbay suddenly announced that the Labor party would run alone in the elections. He thus disbanded the Zionist Union, a coalition with Tzipi Livni's The Movement (Hatnua). He did so in**

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an extremely humiliating way in Livni's presence without consulting other Labor MKs.

Education Minister Naftali Bennett leader of the Jewish Home (Habayit HaYehudi) and its popular Minister of Justice, Ayelet Shaked, decided to leave their party. They have called their new party the New Right, (Hayemin Hehadash). This party intends to be represented in the Knesset by both religious and non-religious members. Polls vary greatly on how many seats it will receive. The remaining Jewish Home party – now exclusively religious – may be at risk of not passing the 3.25% election threshold to enter the Knesset.

In the previous Knesset, the Kulanu party was the successful newcomer. It is led by Finance Minister Mosher Kahlon who split off from the Likud. Of Kulanu's 10 current MK's, four have announced that they have left it. One of these, retired General Yoav Galant, resigned as Minister of Housing and Construction. Netanyahu then named him as acting Aliyah and Integration Minister. Galant has announced that he will join the Likud. He may well be its only former general running in the next election. Another MK leaving the Kulanu party is the Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's office, Michael Oren. He was formerly ambassador to the United States. Kulanu is doing poorly in the polls and is expected to receive four to five seats.

Orly Levy-Abekasis, a long term Knesset member of the Israel is Our Home party was expelled from it in the outgoing Knesset. She has created her own party, called Bridge (Gesher). She has said that she intends to focus on socioeconomic issues. Polls indicate that this new party has a good chance to pass the election threshold. The splintering of parties on the right has led to a concern that some of the parties may not pass the election threshold and thus create a situation where many votes for the right may be lost. There are thus rumors that efforts will be made to lower the election threshold.

Due to this landscape of ongoing movement, polling results change from one day to the next, and have lost much of their meaning. As far as voters' preference for the position of Prime Minister is concerned Netanyahu still leads the field, closely followed by Gantz.

All this is taking place against a background in which Attorney General Avichay Mandelblit is expected to announce his decision as to whether indict Netanyahu for corruption before the elections. A possible indictment before April 9 would bring

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with it accusations that the Attorney General is interfering in the elections. From now on attention on the structures of parties are likely to decrease and information as well as rumors about possible candidate MKs will become more frequent. Matters will clarify partly at the beginning of February 2019 when several parties will hold primaries to determine their candidates for the elections.

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**FIVE QUESTIONS ABOUT ISRAEL'S POLITICAL MUSICAL CHAIRS**  
*Jonathan S. Tobin*

[JNS](#), Jan. 4, 2018

The old expression is that for every two Jews, there are three political opinions. In Israel, that cliché can be extended to also include four or five political parties. That's never been truer than now as preparations for the Jewish state's next Knesset elections in April have gotten underway. Israel's proportional system for electing its parliament is responsible for the plethora of political parties. Based on pre-state ideas about the need for consensus and inclusion, the system has never produced a clear majority for any single party in Israel's relatively short history.

That trend has been exacerbated in recent decades as each of the two major parties that have led most of the governing coalitions since Israel's birth — Labor and Likud — have splintered with more ideological factions sprouting on the left and the right. In addition to that are sectarian parties representing the various religious sectors and Israeli Arabs. Centrist parties as an alternative to the left and right have been a regular feature of Israeli politics since 1977, when the desire for a non-ideological alternative to Labor resulted in the first Likud-led government headed by Menachem Begin. The centrists have followed a pattern of initial success, followed by collapse within one or two election cycles as these factions — often led by non-ideological former generals with little political experience — crashed and burned once they proved incapable of governing.

But the process of splintering has accelerated with parties on both ends of the spectrum imploding. On the left, the Zionist Union, which matched the remnants of Labor with supporters of veteran party-switcher Tzipi Livni, has broken up after Labor leader Avi Gabbay ditched Livni in a humiliating public smackdown.

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Meanwhile, ministers Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked, who had grown tired of being chained to their more far-right religious and settler supporters, blew up their HaBayit HaYehudi party. Moshe Kahlon's Kulanu party is also coming apart. In the center, former IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Benny Gantz is poised to be the bright new star of 2019. Keeping track of all of these competing egos isn't easy, even for Israeli political junkies, let alone Americans. So for the sake of clarifying what's at stake, I've come up with five key questions about what's happening right now with Israeli politics. First, why are the parties on the right splitting?

The implosion of HaBayit HaYehudi, which had been the strongest of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's right-wing coalition partners, is a function of its leaders. The pair were forced out of the Likud by personal antagonism with Netanyahu, and profited from an awkward alliance with the rump of the old National Religious Party and other even more extreme personalities. But if Bennett is to ever achieve his ambition to succeed Netanyahu, he's got to get back to the Likud. His goal is for his new party, which will attempt to bring together religious and secular voters, to do well enough to be part of the next government and then merge with Likud whenever Netanyahu falls.

Kahlon's party is suffering the usual downturn new parties' experience in their second go round. It will likely be diminished this time, as will Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu, which represents the interests of voters from the former Soviet Union. Even if some voters cast ballots for the smaller parties to keep Netanyahu honest, most voters on the right don't want to diminish the Likud's chances of winning the most seats and forming the next government.

Second, why are the parties of the left splitting? The problem on the left is that as long as Israeli politics is still dominated by security concerns, advocates for more concessions to the Palestinians will remain in the minority. That puts pragmatists like Livni, who wants to join forces with Gantz or Yesh Atid's Yair Lapid to defeat Netanyahu, at a distinct disadvantage. The left sees no reason to water down its message in pursuit of an illusory chance of power. Third, can the centrist and left-wing factions unite in order to stop Netanyahu? As things currently stand, the answer is no. In every poll, the parties currently in Netanyahu's coalition are shown winning a majority in the next Knesset. And that's ignoring the fact that some of the centrists like Gantz may wish to join the next government, rather than sulking in opposition with the left.

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Fourth, is there a real alternative to Netanyahu? Not a chance. Lapid is currently the runner-up in the polls, but he trails Netanyahu by a huge margin. Yet even after more than five years in the Knesset, few consider the former television personality to have the gravitas to run the country or deal with security threats on multiple regional and global levels. Gantz is viewed positively because he is fresh out of the army, though like other generals before him, the shine on his reputation will quickly evaporate. No one takes Livni, Gabbay or anyone on the left seriously when they talk about replacing Netanyahu.

Fifth, who is Netanyahu's real foe? The only person who can stop Netanyahu from continuing in office is Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit. If Mandelblit goes ahead with hearings to consider the recommendations of the police and the state prosecutor's office to indict the prime minister on one or all three corruption charges currently pending against Netanyahu, it might lead to political chaos even if Netanyahu runs and wins the election. Armed with the public's endorsement at the polls, the prime minister might stay in office while he fights the charges, but he will be severely diminished and would be unlikely to survive for long.

At that point, the lack of a natural successor in the Likud (Netanyahu chased away all potential successors like Bennett and Kahlon) will lead to another reshuffling of the political deck. But unless and until that happens, what American observers really need to know about Israeli politics is that Netanyahu is almost certainly going to win a fifth term as prime minister in April.

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### **WHY SHOULD ISRAELIS VOTE IF THEIR VOTE IS MEANINGLESS?**

*Caroline B. Glick*

[Jerusalem Post](#), Dec. 27, 2018

In a recent conversation with a European ambassador, I asked about the possible consequences of the elections to the European parliament, which are scheduled to take place in May 2019. According to current polls, rightist, pro-Israel parties from a host of EU member nations are projected to win the vote in May. I was curious about the impact the projected results may have on European Union policies

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towards Israel.

His answer was straightforward. “European parliamentary election results aren’t particularly significant,” he said with a shrug. “It’s true that pro-Israel rightist parties are expected to do very well. But their victories won’t impact the EU’s foreign policies or any of its substantive policies. All the substantive policy decisions are made by the European Commission in Brussels.”

“The European parliament doesn’t have influence over what happens in Brussels. Its decisions are basically declarative resolutions and opinions. They have no force of law,” he explained. Formally, the situation in Israel is quite different from the situation in the EU. Unlike the European parliament, the Knesset has the power to legislate laws. And the government, which is comprised mainly of members of Knesset, implements policies it was empowered to adopt by the mandate it received from the voters at the polls. But in practice, with each passing day, the situation in Israel is becoming more and more similar to the situation in the EU. Every day, Israel’s bureaucracy, led by the legal system, seizes more and more powers from the country’s elected leaders.

THIS WEEK, we received a glimpse of how this seizure of powers takes place behind closed doors, far from the eyes of the public. On Sunday, Jerusalem District Police commander Maj.-Gen. Yoram Halevy abruptly submitted his resignation to Internal Security Minister Gilad Erdan. Halevy was the likeliest candidate to serve as the next inspector general, after Erdan’s first choice, Police Maj.-Gen. Moshe Edri’s candidacy was rejected by the Appointments Committee run by former Supreme Court justice Eliezer Goldberg.

On Monday, Hadashot news reported that Halevy resigned following a meeting last week with attorney-general Avichai Mandelblit. Also in attendance at the fateful encounter were Erdan, State Prosecutor Shai Nitzan and Deputy Attorney-General Dina Zilber. Halevy had been under the impression that Mandelblit would defend his appointment before the Goldberg Committee, and if necessary, before the Supreme Court. In his legal opinion regarding Halevy’s suitability for the job, Mandelblit concluded that there is no legal basis for preventing Halevy from serving as Police inspector general.

At the meeting, Mandelblit explained to Halevy that law was not the issue. Despite the absence of legal justification for rejecting his appointment, Mandelblit said he would not defend Halevy both before the Goldberg Committee and before the

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Supreme Court. What do you mean? Erdan and Halevy asked. How can you reject Halevy's nomination when there are no legal grounds for doing so? Mandelblit's reasoning should distress all Israelis who care about democracy.

**MANY YEARS ago, Halevy committed a serious disciplinary infraction. An inspector general, Mandelblit argued, needs to be "as pure as the driven snow." Halevy's past infraction made him impure. So no dice. There is a legitimate debate to be had about the sort of character you would want in a police chief. On the one hand, you could argue that it is better to have a chief of police with a checkered past. The chief law enforcement officer is well served with some bad behavior in his rearview mirror. It makes him more likely to treat accused lawbreakers with humility.**

**An equally legitimate argument can be made for having a straight-as-an-arrow lawman fill the top spot in the police. If you want the law enforced without prejudice, hire a chief with unstinting respect for the law who cuts no corners with crooks. However you come down on the question of the suitable character for a police chief, the question itself has nothing to do with the law. Israeli law is devoid of any mention that the inspector general of police must be as "pure as the driven snow." The issue of character is a normative matter, not a legal one...**

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## **A CRYSTAL BALL ON 2019**

*David M. Weinberg*

[Israel Hayom](#), Jan. 4, 2018

**The peril of predicting political and diplomatic developments has been made crystal clear over the past topsy-turvy week. Nevertheless, my forecasts of one year ago were accurate: that there would be no elections and no big wars in 2018. Can't say the same for 2019.**

**Fate of Prime Minister Netanyahu: He will form his fifth coalition government after the April elections, with Benny Gantz as defense minister and Yaacov Litzman**



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(again) as health minister. But the expected indictments against Netanyahu will sooner or later force him into a plea deal to leave politics and avoid jail. Which makes the current election somewhat of a temporary, counterfeit campaign. Everybody in the arena smells the big shakeup in Israeli politics coming just around the bend - a post-Netanyahu era. They are maneuvering for pole position for the next campaign, perhaps in 2020. That is why so many political parties are splintering and clustering in the search for the holy grail: something "new" for the ravenous Israeli voting public.

**Ayelet Shaked and Naftali Bennett: Their "New Right" political party is merely a springboard to Likud leadership, say, in 2020. I believe that when Shaked runs in post-Netanyahu Likud primaries she will win the party leadership hands down - roundly defeating all likely contenders including Gideon Saar and Yisrael Katz.**

**The vaunted Israeli center: Expect more new political parties to pop-up over the next month, all promising "renaissance," "togetherness," "brotherhood," "resilience," "strength," and fealty to "Jewish, Zionist and democratic values" along with commitment to fight "corruption" - but with no clear policies relating to economy, diplomacy and defense. These parties will boast carefully calibrated lists with candidates who supposedly bridge all divides: Ashkenazi and Sephardi, secular and religious, men and women, center and periphery, young and experienced (- with "experienced" being a code-word for vapid politicians with flip-flop multi-party records like Tzipi Livni); plus Arab, Bedouin, Circassian, Druze, Ethiopian, LGBTQ and even Haredi talent. This mode of synthetic and cynical politics reminds me of James Watt's notorious quip that forced his resignation in 1983 from Ronald Reagan's cabinet. Mocking affirmative action in composition of a government panel, Watt said: "I have a black, a woman, two Jews and a cripple. And we have talent."**

**Supreme Court over-interventionism: Court President Esther Hayut is getting ready to declare the Jewish Nation State Law "unconstitutional," even though the law itself is meant to be a constitutional anchor and thus the court has no real jurisdiction. That is the meaning of her recent decision to hear petitions against the law before an expanded 11-justice panel. This is outrageous buttinsky behavior, making it even more necessary that the next Knesset pass a law allowing for override of out-of-bounds court decisions. The court also has been domineering and unhelpful about haredi draft exemptions, striking-down the Tal, Plesner and Shaked plans successively - which were intelligent political-societal compromises**

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that could have worked. Unfortunately, there are no better arrangements in the offing, given the rigidity in haredi society and Israel's convoluted coalition politics.

War in the north: Israel has conducted over 200 known strikes against Iranian targets in Syria, and acted against Iranian-Shiite targets in Iraq, yet the Iranians seem to be digging-in for the long term and are further weaponizing Hezbollah with precision arms too. Therefore, a full-scale Israeli military operation to degrade enemy capabilities is just a question of time; perhaps this summer. "Operation Northern Shield" against Hezbollah's attack tunnels was the warm-up act...

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#### [On Topic Links](#)

[Legendary Defender of Israel Passes Away: Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, \*Jerusalem Online\*, Jan. 7, 2019](#)—Another of the fast-dwindling number of Israel's "old guard" passed away today. Moshe Arens was 93-years-old when he died at his home on Savyon in central Israel.

[Labor's Demise is Bad for Israeli Democracy: Amnon Lord, \*Israel Hayom\*, Jan. 3, 2019](#)—There are those who are filled with joy at the Labor party's demise and the humiliation of Hatnuah Hatnuah party chief Tzipi Livni. I am not one of those people

[Bibi's Formidable Challenger: \*Jerusalem Online\*, Dec. 28, 2018](#)— Benny Gantz, a former Israeli armed forces chief who according to recent polls is the runner-up to current Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, formally established a political party on Thursday to join the 2019 election race.

[Why I am Running for Knesset with Shaked, Bennett: Caroline B. Glick, \*Jerusalem Post\*, Jan. 4, 2019](#)— When I was 12 years old, my family took our first trip outside the United States. We came to Israel on a two-week family tour. It was July 1982. The Lebanon War had just begun. In retrospect, it was the first step on what has become my lifelong Zionist journey.