

Understanding Israeli prime minister Naftali Bennett

Fiercely Zionist yet pragmatic. Bold but not charismatic. The independent leader of a disparate coalition.

by [Mordechai Beck](#) in the [December 1, 2021](#) issue



Naftali Bennett lights a menorah during Hanukkah in 2016. (Photo by בקעי via Creative Commons license)

One thing that everyone seems to agree on about Israel's new prime minister is that he is different. Naftali Bennett is the first religiously observant person to fill that office, though his religious affiliation is the subject of intense debate. Unlike his predecessors, he did not come up through the traditional ranks of a political party apparatus. Instead, he created and then left two small political parties behind him, as though to emphasize that *party* is a term of convenience rather than a moral obligation. And although he retired from the Israeli army with the rank of major, Bennett was never its head—unlike many of Israel's leaders before him. His independence is further emphasized by the fact that he is a self-made multimillionaire, having sold two start-up tech companies for more than \$100 million

each.

Bennett's independent wealth should make him less susceptible to bribery than others in his office have been. Past prime ministers have been imprisoned for corruption; Bennett's predecessor and main political rival, Benjamin Netanyahu, is currently facing charges that could result in him going to jail. The fact that Bennett has left a successful career to serve in office speaks well of his commitment to his country and his people.

Although born in Israel, Bennett spent many of his early years in the United States, where he acquired excellent language skills—an important quality for the international framework in which a leader is expected to interact with others. His US-born parents emigrated to Israel in 1967 and became religiously observant, emphasizing their Zionism as a cardinal belief. Their son has embraced this Zionist ideology so thoroughly that a recent article in the liberal *Haaretz* declared that he no longer sees politics as pitting left against right but rather Zionist against anti-Zionist. His religious beliefs are in some ways more fluid and flexible than his Zionism, and he tends to prefer a more pragmatic stance to a rigidly ideological one.

For these reasons he has been particularly harsh against *haredi* politicians (often called ultra-Orthodox). He has called for reducing their influence on the rest of the population by modifying their state-granted authority on such issues as personal status (i.e., what defines a Jew), marriage, divorce, and kosher food. As minister of education under Netanyahu, Bennett was keen to see the *haredi* community participate more in general education that would allow them to enter the workforce.

This has set him at odds with a group that might otherwise have been a natural part of his coalition: right-wing religious Zionists. They accuse him of being a renegade to their nationalistic cause. These religious Zionists often echo the prejudices of the late rabbi Meir Kahane, whose racist rants led to his being disbarred from the Knesset before he was assassinated in New York in 1990. Now his disciples are in the Knesset, but not as partners of the government.

In Israel, religion and state have always gone hand in hand, not always to the good of either one. Unusually for a religious public figure, Bennett did not attend a yeshiva and has shown himself to be free of rabbinic influence. So the potential for political issues to be addressed on their own merit, without religious dimensions clouding them, exists with Bennett in a way we perhaps have not seen in Israeli

politics.

One area the prime minister, for all his pragmatism, has failed to address is the settler violence against Palestinians on the West Bank. A relatively small section of settlers harass and attack Palestinians, unprovoked and for no reason, preventing them from shepherding their flocks or tending to their fields. While the settlements exist in defiance of international law, Bennett and others refer to these areas by their biblical names, as a way of claiming them for Israel. And the violence there—which is largely supported by the army and the border police—stands in the way of Israel creating a meaningful political solution to its current crises. Bennett and his coalition partners have yet to even acknowledge this issue.

As for the wider area of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Bennett has gone full-out for his Zionist dream, in which no Palestinian state will arise between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. But he has done this while simultaneously nurturing a less harsh posture toward the Palestinians living on the West Bank and even in Gaza. He recently offered work permits to 7,000 Palestinians from the Gaza Strip, even though Israel has no formal contact with the Hamas authorities there.

At the United Nations in September, Bennett spoke about his internal problem of keeping his slender coalition majority together. It relies on small parties, his own included, but so far he seems to have kept them in order. It is an issue that he has juggled successfully—some would say miraculously.

This success is due in part to the parties' shared fear of allowing Netanyahu back into the political ring. Even the Arab Muslim party Ra'am, the first such party to participate in an Israeli government, has remained in the coalition despite some major problems with Bennett's policies. Some observers suggest that if Netanyahu retires from Likud party leadership—or is found guilty of corruption and maybe even imprisoned—then the party he has led for ten years may form a coalition with Bennett, since in many ways their political views overlap.

Writing in *Haaretz*, Nehemia Shtrasler recently voiced surprise that Bennett's popularity has not increased, given his success in a number of crucial areas. He insisted on a third COVID shot for Israelis, and he kept the economy open and then saw COVID cases fall anyway. He introduced a budget—something not done for three years—and other successful economic reforms. He repaired diplomatic relations with the United States, as well as with Egypt and Jordan, whose leaders

kept their distance from Netanyahu. He broke the *haredi* rabbis' monopoly over kosher food.

In Shtrasler's opinion, it's Bennett's lack of charisma that has prevented his popularity from increasing. He is seen as a technocrat, not as a leader with vision. Bennett has been very careful not to rock the political boat too much. It remains to be seen how far he will keep afloat in the choppy seas of a deeply divided coalition.

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