

# Netanyahu predicted to call early Israeli election

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Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is expected to announce a snap election for September. Elections are not due till October 2013, but his political manoeuvre has been forced on him by a government wracked by divisions and corruption scandals.

There is no indication that such an election, where Netanyahu's Likud party is expected to be the leading party with 30 of the 120 Knesset seats, will lead to a change in course. Both the major opposition parties, Kadima and Labour, have said they are willing to join a future Netanyahu-led coalition.

The purpose of such an election is to provide a more manageable coalition, while at the same time giving undeserved political credibility to a predetermined policy of militarism and attacks on the social position of working people and their families.

Iran is a significant source of dispute within the ruling elite. There are major splits between the government and the defence-intelligence establishment about the Netanyahu government's claims that Tehran is building nuclear weapons and its constant threats to carry out pre-emptive air strikes. Iran for its part has vowed to respond to any such attacks. This has led to unprecedented and very public opposition from senior current and former military and intelligence officials.

Last Friday, Yuval Diskin, the former head of Shin Bet, Israel's internal security agency, warned against an attack on Iran, saying that it was likely to hasten rather than stop Tehran's building of a nuclear bomb. He attacked Netanyahu and Defence Minister Ehud Barak, saying that they were "messianic" politicians who could not be trusted, especially on Iran. The two men were "not the people I would like to be holding the steering wheel" during a crisis, Diskin said.

Earlier, Lieutenant General Benny Glantz, Israel's current chief of staff, in an interview with *Ha'aretz*, insisted that diplomacy and negotiations with Iran were bearing fruit, and that its nuclear capabilities were not as imminent as Netanyahu had made out. He agreed with US intelligence assessments that Tehran had not yet decided whether or not to build a nuclear bomb, and he did not think it would do so, as Iran's leadership was "very rational".

Glantz was echoing the words of Meir Dagan, the former head of Mossad, Israel's external intelligence service, who last year described the Iranian government as a "very rational one". He had called an Israeli attack on Iran the "stupidest idea" he had ever heard. In an interview with CBS last month, he said that a war with Iran would have a devastating impact on Israel because it would "ignite, at least from my point of view, a regional war."

Tamir Pardo, Mossad's current head, holds similar views. Last December, he told a forum of Israeli diplomats that he did not believe there was an "existential threat" to Israel.

Concerns are also being raised by Ehud Olmert, who headed a Kadima-led coalition, as well as by the newly elected Kadima leader Shaul Mofaz and Israel's president, Shimon Peres.

These statements give the lie to the repeated claims that Iran is developing nuclear weapons, the ostensible reason for Israel and the US war-mongering against Tehran.

They will also strengthen popular opposition to war within Israel. According to a recent poll by the Israeli Democracy Institute and Tel Aviv University, 63 percent of Israelis oppose a pre-emptive strike on Iran's nuclear power facilities, while an earlier poll by the University of Maryland put the figure higher.

As well as divisions within the ruling elite and broad popular opposition to the government's threats against Iran, Netanyahu's right-wing coalition is riven with dissent over domestic policies affecting their own social constituencies.

The first is the issue of drafting Orthodox Jews into the army. Netanyahu had pledged to put a stop to the ability of the ultra-Orthodox Jews, who now form up to 30 percent of the population, to postpone indefinitely their compulsory military service under the Tal Law—due to expire in July—if they are enrolled in religious seminaries. His proposals would also require Israel's Arab citizens, who make up almost 20 percent of the population and are currently exempt from the draft, to perform some form of “national” service. They are now caught between Avigdor Lieberman's fiercely secular Israel Beiteinu and the ultra-orthodox factions in his coalition, who are fighting any attempt to require military, “national” or social service of any kind.

The second is the Supreme Court's order to dismantle Beit El, an illegal West Bank outpost built on private Palestinian land using forged papers, that is bitterly opposed by Netanyahu's ultra-nationalist coalition partners and members of his own party. In an effort to appease them, Netanyahu has set up a ministerial committee to find ways around the court's order. It is believed to be considering introducing retroactive legislation to legalise this and other illegal outposts subject to demolition orders.

Allegations of corruption and financial misconduct swirl around among top officials and politicians. Former prime minister Ehud Olmert faces numerous charges, including fraud, breach of trust and concealing fraudulent earnings. Foreign Minister Lieberman, under investigation for a string of allegations relating to money-laundering, fraud, breach of trust and witness harassment during 2001 and 2008, when he was a government minister, is likely to be indicted by the attorney general.

Netanyahu's key motivation for advancing the election date is to strengthen his position within the cabinet against his religious and ultra-nationalist partners, all of whom are involved in “special pleading” for their supporters, before implementing further attacks on social spending demanded by the financial elite later this year. The government is acutely aware of widespread social unrest, as wages have fallen

in real terms, making it harder for workers and their families to make ends meet.

Fully 1.7 million of Israel's 7.8 million population live in poverty, while 837,000 children go to bed hungry every night. Last summer saw the largest-ever protests over housing costs and social inequality that the government has done nothing to address, ignoring even the Trajtenberg Commission's modest recommendations. That is why the issue of corruption and the wealth of Israel's oligarchs is such a politically explosive issue.



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