

Israeli prime minister Netanyahu calls March 2015 general election

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Last Tuesday evening, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu fired Finance Minister Yair Lapid and Justice Minister Tzipi Livni, the leaders of two of the parties in his dysfunctional right-wing coalition government, accusing them of disloyalty.

Without a majority in the Knesset, he called for a general election on March 17, appealing to ultra-nationalist and religious parties to back him. Coming less than two years after the last election, it testifies to the mounting social, economic and political crisis of the Zionist state.

The provocative stance of Israel's right-wing politicians and their supporters, against the Palestinians both within Israel itself and within the Occupied Territories, and in regards to the al-Aqsa mosque compound in occupied East Jerusalem, threatens to ignite not just an uprising in Israel/Palestine, but also an international protest movement that would destabilise the entire region. Such a movement would further strain relations between Israel and the US and European powers.

Last Monday, following weeks of political infighting, Netanyahu set a trap for Lapid and his Yesh Atid party. He precipitated a furious row with Lapid by rejecting the finance minister's flagship proposal for a zero-VAT bill for first-time home buyers, estimated to cost \$760 million, after the entire cabinet had voted for it. When Lapid and his close associate Livni of the Tenua party failed to resign in protest, preferring to retain their cabinet seats, Netanyahu sacked them both. He calculated that he could form a more pliant coalition based on Israel's ultra-right-wing parties.

Netanyahu sought to justify his gamble with the cynical claim that the ministers were disloyal and were plotting a "putsch" against him. He said, "I am taking a risk in order to improve the governance." Nothing could be further from the truth.

Netanyahu is banking on polls showing his Likud party

likely to retain 20-24 seats in the 120-seat Knesset. The right-wing Jewish Home party, headed by his current favourite coalition partner, Naftali Bennett, is likely to take second place, with 17 seats. His erstwhile political partner, Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman of the Israel Our Home party, has pulled out of a political alliance with Likud, and is likely to hold 12 seats. In a bid to position himself as a rival to succeed Netanyahu as Washington's man in Israel, Lieberman has declared in favour of a "peace plan" endorsing a two-state solution.

The so-called "left" and centrist parties, whose policies are barely distinguishable from Netanyahu's, have little credibility. The Labour Party, which has bid farewell to two leaders since mass social protests in 2011, is unlikely to gain more than 13 seats. Livni's Tenua and the Meretz Party, both of which remain committed to talks with the Palestinians to secure the so-called two state solution, are expected to win four and seven respectively.

Yesh Atid, a secular party formed by former TV presenter Lapid in the wake of the 2011 protests, and which came second in the last elections, has proved a damp squib. It is likely to see its support collapse to just half.

Netanyahu's position is by no means secure. Loathed by the Palestinians and under attack at home for imposing savage cuts to pay for war, his popularity has fallen. That said, he has no obvious rival with any sizable constituency.

According to the Ynet website, Netanyahu is working to bring forward the primaries for the leadership of the Likud party so as to prevent former interior minister Gideon Sa'ar running against him in the elections. While Sa'ar has not decided whether to challenge Netanyahu, a poll last Friday showed that 43 percent of the general public preferred him to Netanyahu, who got only 38 percent.

Without a majority in the Knesset, Netanyahu is set to

lose next year's budget, leaving the current budget to set the framework for 2015. Under the 2014 budget, the defence ministry received \$14 billion and was due an additional \$1.5 billion for 2015, which it believes is inadequate. Now even that will be frozen. Likewise, all the budget additions that Lapid secured for education, social services and health will be frozen.

This budget paralysis comes as Israel's economy, hit by last summer's 50-day war on Gaza, has contracted for the first time in five years. Rising prices have eroded living standards, leading to demands for an increase in the minimum wage from its current monthly level of 4,300 shekels (US\$1,080) to 5,300 shekels (US\$1,355.) A nationwide strike, the first in nearly three years, was due to start last week but was called off by the trade union federation Histadrut.

The war on Gaza has taken its toll on Israel in other ways. While devastating in its human, social and economic costs, it failed to defeat Hamas as a fighting force. It was called off only under pressure from Washington, because international protests against Israel's merciless attacks on defenceless civilians threatened to spark a wider anti-war movement.

This was at the very moment when the Obama administration was seeking to assemble a military coalition—ostensibly against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)—to assert its geo-strategic interests in Iraq and Syria.

Israel has had to establish its own criminal investigations into the one-sided war in an effort to exonerate itself and challenge a UN Human Rights Council commission of inquiry into possible war crimes.

On Saturday, the defence establishment announced it would investigate a July 20 air strike on the Abu Jama family home in the town of Khan Younis, in which 27 Palestinians, all of whom were civilians according to human rights groups, were killed. The investigations will also examine the deaths of two Palestinian ambulance drivers on July 25 in Israeli strikes and a July 29 incident in which a Palestinian carrying a white flag was killed. Four additional probes will look into looting allegations. These enquiries, along with those set up in September into attacks that killed four Palestinian children on a beach and 17 people at a UN school, bring to 85 the number of incidents under legal review by the military.

Israel is becoming increasingly isolated internationally. The governments of Sweden and Belgium and the legislatures of France, Britain and Ireland have voted to recognise Palestine, a symbolic move that will not

immediately affect their diplomatic stance, but demonstrates the growing European impatience with Israel.

Netanyahu's relations with Washington are at an all-time low. The Obama administration is furious over his relentless expansion of settlements in the Occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem, which has led to a freezing of talks with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, a key US asset. Another source of contention is Netanyahu's support for the religious zealots, who have sought increased access to the Al Aqsa mosque compound, and the provocative marches by prominent Israeli politicians escorted by armed guards that threaten to spark a third Palestinian uprising. (See: Israel's Netanyahu threatens clampdown after synagogue killing).

Relations have been further strained by Netanyahu's decision to support the Jewish nation-state bill setting the constitutional and legal framework for an apartheid-style state. This comes under conditions where the physical separation of the Israelis and Palestinians is already far advanced, thanks to the Separation Wall and military control of Area C in the West Bank, and the blockade of Gaza. (See: Netanyahu's "Jewish nation" bill enshrines an apartheid-style constitution).

Netanyahu's actions expose the lies of successive US administrations, which have peddled illusions in the possibility of a Palestinian statelet at some future date as a fig leaf to cover the Arab leaders' support for Washington's predatory and unpopular oil wars.

In a sign of Washington's disquiet, the Obama administration leaked reports claiming the White House is considering imposing sanctions on Israel for continuing its construction of Jewish homes in East Jerusalem.

Senior Israeli officials told *Ha'aretz*, "White House officials held a classified discussion a few weeks ago about the possibility of taking active measures against the settlements." The discussion about levying sanctions against Israel apparently began after Netanyahu's visit to the White House in October and the subsequent row between Washington and Jerusalem over settlement construction.



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