

New Israeli government - “not in our name”?

Debate rages in Jewish communities over the new Israeli government

The electoral success of extreme right wing organisations in the Israeli election, and their participation in a government led by Netanyahu, has created a sharp debate in Jewish communities about how they should respond to the most right wing government in the country's history.

Editor of the UK Jewish News, Richard Ferrer wrote

“Seeing them handed power is tortuous for most British Jews, who now find themselves asking questions they never wanted to ask and drawing conclusions they never wanted to reach, that undermine all they hold dear about the Jewish state.”

He continues

“Today, British Jews – well, at least the ones whose stomachs are turning rather than their heads – are screaming: not in our name! Our conscience – our love for the Jewish state, for all it was, is and could be – demands we speak out, even if obsessive Israel bashers are gleefully licking their chops at the spectacle.”

He observes that a “significant minority” of British Jews “don't dare speak out” but hold their noses. “For some the unedifying spectacle of Jews criticising Israel is too much to bear.” They ask “If diaspora Jews don't stand up for Israel who will?” But they should be asking, says Ferrer, “If I don't think this is indefensible, what is?”

He says that the divide in the community has been brought into focus by the differences between Jewish News and Jewish Chronicle. JN has had headlines: “Where's the outrage?” and “Our worst fears.”. Ferrer says that it is “adamant that a line has been crossed and that line is where hatred begins”. In contrast the Jewish Chronicle has “a less than helpful position”, “to ignore the problem”.

“It thinks only racists who *aren't* Israeli politicians deserve contempt, writing in recent editorials, “It is not for us to make pre-conditions on our support for Israel” and, “We should not reduce the diaspora's relationship to political calculus”.

Ferrer says that Israel is “bigger than a few bigots” but

“[Ben-Gvir](#) and [Smotrich's](#) world-view, after all, is grounded in the history and the politics of the region. It's ying to the Arab yang. No Jews in Arab lands, no Arabs in Israel. Fight fire with fire. Burn everything, including Israel's precious relationship with much of the Jewish world.”

The BoD congratulates Netanyahu

Meanwhile a similar stance to the JC has been taken by the Board of Deputies and the Jewish Leadership Council. The BoD congratulated Netanyahu on his election victory despite the fact that it has only been made possible by the very “individuals whose stated views and actions are in contrast to the tolerant and inclusive values of our community” they complain of. The BoD hopes that the government will “work on behalf of all its citizens as well as striving to advance regional peace”. That is, they hope that a government which has cultivated and will include the Ben-Gavirs and the Smotrichs in positions of power, will strive for peace when it sees the whole area to the sea as God-given to the Jews! No way.

They profess the hope “to continue working with those in the Israeli government and in civil society who seek to advance peace, security, prosperity and fairness.” This is delusional since *any* Netanyahu government has zero intention of working for peace, having worked instead for the growth of settlements in the West Bank.

The JLC was also “extremely concerned” about “some of the potential members of the government coalition”.

“Their views in relation to minorities and non-orthodox Jews raise serious concerns about the Israel we care about and support. We will continue to support those in the Israeli government and Israeli society who share the values of democracy, pluralism and inclusion.”

It is almost as if the presence of Ben Gvir and Smotrich is viewed as accidental or incidental, instead of the culmination of a long process, the 55 year “temporary” occupation.

Youth groups

Four British Jewish youth groups, Noam Masorti Youth, RSY-Netzer, LJY-Netzer and Habonim Dror groups issue statement confirming their members will 'not engage with any member of the Religious Zionist Party'. A joint statement says they will not engage with them nor share a platform with them.

They continue: “We unequivocally condemn the racism, homophobia, misogyny, and anti progressive Jewish sentiment upon which the Religious Zionist Party is founded.” The statement adds :”We wish to make it explicitly clear that anti-Palestinian hatred, Jewish exceptionalism, racism and homophobia have no place in youth movements.” The groups call on “our communal bodies” to take a similar stance. Addressing the issue of criticising Israel from the diaspora, the group’s confirm they are all “committed to Israel as a Jewish and democratic state” but add: “It is our duty to criticise when it fails to uphold the values enshrined in the Declaration of Independence.”

Labour Friends of Israel

In another contribution to JN, Matan Rosenstrauch, an Israeli peace activist living in London, recounts discussion with Labour Friends of Israel. Although LFI are nominally in favour of a two state solution he questions their attachment to it.

“In the conversation with LFI, I discovered they support Israel, the state, not the government. So, what happens when the elected government of that state acts unapologetically against the 2SS, a solution which the international community, including the political party LFI operates within (the Labour Party), supports? Would this change their support for Israel? Again. Wishful thinking.”

Rosenstrauch opines that

“...with Ben Gvir and Smortich in power, it’s the perfect timing to uncover some truths: Israel’s government supports a one Jewish only state; and, those who claim to support the 2SS but recognise only one people’s right for self-determination, *actually support a one state* solution (my emphasis). Don’t be fooled by this contradiction.”

It's arguable that Oslo was always a trap for the Palestinians and none of the mainstream political Parties in Israel were ever serious about the "two state solution". Netanyahu has never seen it as an objective. Today with settlements still increasing and the state increasing its control of the West Bank it's clear that *nobody* in the new Cabinet will be working for peace or a two state solution.

"Equality before the law is absent" (in the West Bank)

Even supporters of Israel can see that the West Bank occupation denies Palestinians any rights. Military Law still applies there whilst the settlements operate under Israeli law. It is interesting, therefore, to see Vivian Wineman, ex-President of the Board of Deputies reporting on a recent trip. He admits that in the West Bank "equality before the law is completely absent".

"Broadly speaking, there are two systems of law in Area C. There is a version of Israeli civilian law which applies to Jewish settlers in the area and military law which applies to everyone else, and in particular to Palestinians. The two systems are very different. To give just one example; the protections given to defendants under Israeli civilian law- the extent of *habeas corpus* access to counsel, etc, are much more extensive than to those under Israeli military rule."

Gary Mond, responding to Ferrer's piece, says he gives expression to what is now "a huge issue of division within our community".

"Indeed, with specific regard to Israel-related matters, I don't think there has ever been such a schism among UK Jewry since the modern state of Israel was founded."

Mond says that to criticise the outcome of a democratic election sets a bad precedent.

"...this is simply a democratic decision by Israel's electorate and it sets a very bad precedent for anyone to condemn an election outcome in any country, let alone where the complainants are Jews and the country being criticised is Israel."

Mond complains about the BoD's "disgraceful attack" against Smotrich when he visited Britain earlier in the year. The BoD condemned his "disgusting ideology which promotes hatred". The Zionist Federation of Britain and Ireland also condemned his "far-right politics of hatred and division" that "have no place in our country nor in our community," including targeting the "LGBTQ+ community, Reform Jews or Arab Israelis."

Mond wants dialogue with Smotrich and his like since they have been accepted as "a legitimate part of the world of political debate". Referring to Ferrer's contention that "the coming to power of the Religious Zionists undermines all that most British Jews hold dear about the Jewish state", he asks what do we hold dear?

"For me, it is the belief that, at long last after almost 2,000 years, Jews have finally returned to our ancestral homeland. Additionally, it is the understanding that there is at least one place in the world where Jews will always be welcome and the knowledge that, if modern Israel had been created just 15 years earlier, millions of Jews, including those from my own family, would almost certainly not have perished in the Holocaust. Israel is in the blood of many Jews and *this is not affected adversely by the Religious Zionists* (my emphasis)."

For Mond there is a political struggle taking place within Jewish communities.

“We know about the massive inroads that J Street (in the USA) and Yachad and Na’amod (in the UK) have made in terms of turning the diaspora against Israel.”

All these groups are “turning the diaspora against Israel”.

“Whatever one thinks of the Religious Zionist agenda, I believe that it is in the interest of the fabric of our community to get ourselves away from the politics of hurling insulting expressions and cancelling those whose views with which we do not agree, and try instead to engender a healthy and frank exchange of views.”

Essentially his position seems to be our country right or wrong, whatever it does. He finds “insulting expressions” towards the far-right unacceptable yet appears not too troubled by the oppression of Arabs in the West Bank.

“Abominable whoredom”

In addition to Netanyahu’s Likud, the future coalition will include two parties representing Israel’s ultra-Orthodox community, and three far-right groups that ran as an alliance in last month’s election; one headed by Ben-Gvir, another led by his fellow ultra-nationalist Bezalel Smotrich, and Noam, the vehemently anti-LGBT party of Avi Maoz. Maoz has pledged to cancel the Jerusalem Pride Parade, despite reassurances by Netanyahu to the contrary. “These marches harm the holy Jerusalem and our public sphere,” Maoz [told](#) a small religious weekly, calling the annual demonstration “a parade of abominable whoredom in public.”

Ben-Gvir is set to hold enhanced powers over the police, and Smotrich’s Religious Zionism party is set to control agencies that regulate civilian life in the West Bank. Among the other changes is an amendment allowing people with criminal convictions whose jail sentences have been suspended to serve as ministers. Once enacted, it will enable one of Netanyahu’s key allies, Aryeh Deri, who heads the ultra-Orthodox Shas party and was convicted earlier this year of tax fraud, to head the interior and health ministries.

Among the government's priorities is a sweeping judicial overhaul that members of the incoming coalition have said should enable lawmakers to “override” High Court rulings with a simple majority and give politicians control over appointing judges. Some coalition members have also proposed scrapping the offence of breach of trust — one of the charges that Netanyahu is fighting in his corruption trial.

Smotrich once described himself as a “proud homophobe” who would curb the powers of the Supreme Court to hold the government to account, calls non-Orthodox Jews “fake” and wants to expel Arabs and annex the West Bank. He has also backed separating Jewish and Arab mothers in maternity wards.

Other Jews “want to destroy us”

Maoz — who will control some extracurricular activities in schools — has claimed a woman’s greatest contribution to society is marrying and raising a family. In 2019, his Noam party likened liberal Jews, left-wing activists and gay rights campaigners to Nazis and Palestinian suicide bombers, claiming they all “want to destroy us”.

A disciple of Meir Kahane, an extremist rabbi who wanted to strip Arab Israelis of citizenship, Ben-Gvir was convicted in 2007 of inciting racism and supporting a terrorist organisation. Until a couple of years ago he kept in his house a picture of Baruch Goldstein, a Jewish supremacist who killed 29 Palestinian worshippers and wounded 125,

in a mosque in Hebron.

During the election campaign, he wooed voters with pledges to expel Palestinians deemed traitors and to ease open-fire rules for Israeli security forces. Shortly after the vote he drew censure from the US for attending a memorial for Kahane in Jerusalem. But Smotrich and Ben-Gvir, who both live in settlements, want the expansion of settlements and the legalisation of dozens of outposts that even Israel does not recognise.

Don't worry says Netanyahu, I'm in charge. "I have a record in general of having two hands on the wheel. And I ultimately decide policy . . . In the first instance, in the last instance," Netanyahu told NBC News this month. "I'm going to safeguard Israeli democracy. I'm going to bring peace categorically . . . That's what I'm coming back for."

However, the fact is that Netanyahu has helped to create the electoral force of the far-right, which won 10.8% of the vote, for one reason: to enable him to come back to power.

The Financial Times Editorial said:

"Since Benjamin Netanyahu won Israel's elections, the former prime minister has struck deals with anti-Arab racists, homophobes and politicians convicted of crimes. As a result, he is on the cusp of returning to power after 18 months in opposition and presiding over the most extreme, right-wing government in the Jewish state's history. It is an appalling indictment of the lengths Netanyahu — who is also still on trial for corruption — is willing to go to maintain his dominance of Israeli politics as he heads towards a sixth term as prime minister. It spells disaster for liberal-minded Israelis and the Palestinians."

It is no small thing putting these people in government. They are vehement racists — they view Arabs as the enemy and fifth columnists within Israel. It is pretty much impossible to have a dialogue with them because they believe that God promised the land to the Jews. Arabs can only live in Israel if they accept the "Jewish state". "We are the overlords now", said Ben-Gvir.

Opposition within Israel

Those supporters of Israel in the diaspora who think that no line has been crossed by the presence of Smotrich, Ben-Gvir and Moaz in government, might pay attention to the outrage in Israel and signs of opposition. The Israeli magazine +972 reports that

"It is difficult to remember the last time an Israeli government raised such widespread opposition and resistance before it was even sworn in. Incoming Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's new, extreme-right coalition has led to dozens of mayors across the country saying they will **not cooperate** with the ultra-religious, blatantly homophobic Knesset member Avi Maoz, who is slated to lead the unit responsible for extra-curricular classes, and who seems to be gearing up to block educational programs aimed at teaching liberal values, gender equality, and tolerance toward minority groups."

"Gadi Eizenkot, the Israeli army's former chief of staff, has **called for** mass protests in the streets, as has outgoing prime minister Yair Lapid, who **pledged** to "protect the courts, the IDF, and the schools." The head of the Israel Bar Association similarly **said** the public should "take to the streets" to stop the government from implementing its plans to curb the authority of the courts and to allow politicians to determine judicial appointments. The outgoing chief of staff, Aviv Kochavi, was quoted in closed conversations on Monday that **he will not permit** any politician — except the defense minister — to appoint senior military officers, nor to move responsibility for the West Bank Border Police away from the military.

The chief justice of the Supreme Court, Esther Hayut, [said](#) that judges won't be able to "fulfil their duty" should the independence of the legal system be jeopardized."

+972 magazine suggests that the coalition plans involve

- handing over all "Palestinian affairs" on both sides of the Green Line to the racist settler right, while promoting annexation and formalized apartheid;
- and second, enforcing an unabashedly anti-liberal vision of Judaism on the Israeli public while de-fanging Israel's already-enfeebled democratic institutions, especially the judiciary.

Netanyahu's is [giving control](#) of the Civil Administration and the Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), which run the day-to-day affairs of millions of Palestinians under occupation, to Bezalel Smotrich, and is [reallocating](#) the Border Police to the authority of Itamar Ben Gvir as the new "national security minister." We can expect increased annexation and an even more repressive regime in the West Bank.

"Both politicians seek to force the Palestinians to kneel by giving them two options: either a complete surrender and the acceptance of Jewish supremacy throughout Greater Israel, or emigration. Smotrich's [detailed plan](#) for Palestinian surrender, published in 2017, includes a clause for Israeli security forces to treat anyone who opposes those two options "with greater force than we use today and under more favourable conditions for us." In short, a new Nakba."

From the River Jordan to the sea there is room only for one national movement, says Smotrich; that of the Jewish people. This isn't yet the programme of the new government but increasing the settler population and supporting new settlements leads in that direction. Even before the new government takes over we have already seen a campaign of displacement of Arabs on the spurious grounds of wanting land for military purposes.

Democracy?

What has been termed "the Jewish community" has never been a monolith, though anti-Zionists have been marginalised of late in the UK as a result of the campaign to identify it as anti-Semitic. But as the discussion over the new government, even before it takes office, shows, supporters of the Israeli state will have to face up to challenging the rampantly racist programme of the government or turning a blind eye. Apologias will become more difficult. There is no democratic wing to the government. Whilst Netanyahu's embrace of the far-right is a pragmatic attempt to bring together the political forces to enable him to resume power, his political trajectory is the result of support for the growth of the settlements and the operation of a permanent, rather than temporary occupation. The growth of the far right, particularly in the settlements, is the inevitable result of a military occupation in which Arabs are oppressed and treated as less than human. Israeli soldiers facilitate settler violence against Arabs on a daily basis.

There is more to democracy than elections. In what sense can Israel be considered a democracy when it has held millions of people under military rule for more than half a century? As Vivian Wiseman says, in the West Bank "equality before the law is completely absent". The credibility of Israeli 'democracy' ("the only democracy in the middle east") rests on the fact that Arab Israeli's can vote. Yet, as I have explained elsewhere the Israeli state "[cannot be both Jewish and democratic](#)". Both Jews and Arabs are denied the right to challenge the status quo. Should they call for the country to be "a state of all their citizens" they can be barred from standing for election. Attempts in the Knesset to introduce a bill to

transform Israel into “a state of all its citizens” have been ruled out of order and no debate allowed.

What has united supporters of the Israeli state is their absolute support for its existence as a “Jewish state”. In America there has been a sea change amongst sections of the Jewish community to the extent that there are concerns that Israel will “lose the diaspora”, especially amongst the young. Sections of them, illustrated by the political evolution of [Peter Beinart](#), have drawn the conclusion that the two state solution is dead, and that the struggle for equality and equal citizenship in Israel is paramount. If the debate in the USA is more advanced than in Britain, nevertheless the debate between JN and the JC presages an intensification of differences in the face of the new government. As the editor of JN has said if this is not indefensible then what is? Supporters of the Jewish state will be forced to “ask questions that they never wanted to ask” and maybe “conclusions they never wanted to reach”. The implications of all this for the Labour Party will be looked at a separate article.

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