

## Israel: Political development and data for 2017

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### Introduction

In 2017, the Israeli governing majority was partially split by issues of state and religion, and it was overshadowed by police investigations over corruption charges involving the Prime Minister and his entourage. Yet the coalition remained stable and unchallenged. The opposition was temporarily reinvigorated by the election of a new leader for the Labor Party, but polls continued to show a widespread support for the Likud-led coalition. While Israel continued to experience ‘lone-wolf’ terrorist attacks, its international standing improved dramatically with the election in the United States of Donald Trump and thanks to a proactive foreign policy which produced significant achievements. The Israeli economy continued to grow with healthy macroeconomic parameters.

### Election report

There were no elections in 2017. The present Knesset was elected in March 2015 and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman have both predicted that the present government will serve its full term – an optimistic estimation given the fact that no legislature in Israel has served its full term since 1988 (Israel Central Elections Committee n.d.).

### Cabinet report

While there were no changes in the composition of the government, the political standing of Prime Minister Netanyahu was overshadowed by police investigations involving him and his entourage. In January began a series of police interrogations of the Prime Minister over two separate cases. In one case, he and his wife were suspected of receiving expansive gifts from a close friend over the years allegedly in exchange for personal favours. In another case, he was suspected of having negotiated with *Yediot Aharonot* publisher Arnon (Nuni) Mozes more favourable coverage in exchange for a reduced circulation of *Israel Hayom* (a pro-Netanyahu newspaper whose free distribution affects the revenues of *Yediot Aharonot*). In addition, Netanyahu’s lawyer and close confidant David Shimron was interrogated by police for allegedly being paid kickbacks in the purchase of submarines by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).

Netanyahu's authority was also challenged by the demands of the coalition's two ultra-orthodox parties (United Torah Judaism and Shas) and by those demands' impact on Israel–Diaspora relations. In June, the government backtracked on an agreement previously reached with major US Jewish organizations on two sensitive issues: prayer arrangements at the Western (wailing) Wall in Jerusalem; and conversions to Judaism. Prayer at the Western Wall is conducted according to the orthodox custom, and it is challenged by reform Jews (mostly from the United States). An agreement had been reached between the previous Israeli government and US Jewry to establish a separate area for non-orthodox praying, but the ultra-orthodox parties (which were excluded from the previous government) coerced the Prime Minister into reneging on this agreement. As for conversions, Israel's orthodox rabbinate has a monopoly over them, yet most American Jews are not orthodox and they want their conversions to be recognized in Israel. Under the reneged agreement, Israel would have recognized conversions performed under Reform and Conservative auspices. The reneging of both agreements created a rift, and even a crisis, between Israel and US Jewry.

Also in the realm of state and religion, the High Court of Justice struck down in September the law passed in 2015 by the Knesset on the drafting to the IDF of the ultra-orthodox (the law was lenient on draft dodging by the ultra-orthodox). The ruling set a one-year deadline for the Knesset to pass a new, and non-discriminatory, law (i.e., by September 2018). While the government survived the infighting between the ultra-orthodox parties and Defense Minister Lieberman's secularist Israel Our Home party, issues of state and religion have undermined the cabinet's cohesion.

There were minor changes in the composition of the cabinet. In January, MP Eli Cohen (Kulanu party) was appointed Economy and Industry Minister (a portfolio held until then by Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon). In May, MP Ayoob Kara (Likud) was appointed Communications Minister (a portfolio held until then by Prime Minister Netanyahu). In November, Minister of Health, Yakov Litzman (United Torah Judaism party) resigned his post and was replaced by Prime Minister Netanyahu.

## **Parliament report**

The year 2017 witnessed the resignation of five Members of Knesset (MKs). In March, MP Basel Ghattas (Joint List) resigned from the Knesset to serve a two-year prison sentence for having secretly and illegally supplied cellphones and SIM cards to convicted Palestinian terrorists. Also in March, MP Orly Levy-Abecassis was formally expelled from the Israel Our Home Knesset faction and started serving as an independent MP. In September, MP Yigal Guetta (Shas Party) resigned after publicly admitting that he had attended the gay marriage of a nephew. In October, two frontbench Labor MPs resigned from the Knesset: Professor Manuel Trachtenberg (who, in 2011, had headed the national commission on the cost of living) and Erel Margalit (who unsuccessfully ran for Labor's chairmanship in July 2017). Also in October, Meretz Chair and MP Zehava Gallon resigned from the Knesset to dedicate herself to the promotion of open primaries in her party (Knesset n.d.).

Table 1. Cabinet composition of Netanyahu IV in Israel in 2017

Duration of cabinet Period covered by table Type of cabinet:	Inception From	14 May 2015 1 January 2017	Dissolution Until	Still in office at the end of 2017 31 December 2017			
	Oversized coalition (OC)						
A. Party/gender composition on 1 January 2017	Seats in cabinet		Seats held by women		Seats in parliament		
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	% of party	<i>N</i>	%	
Likud	11	52.4%	2	18.8%	30	25.0%	
Kulanu	2	9.5%	0	0.0%	10	8.3%	
Jewish Home	3	14.3%	1	33.3%	8	6.7%	
Shas	2	9.5%	0	0.0%	7	5.8%	
Israel Our Home	2	9.5%	1	50.0%	5	4.2%	
United Torah Judaism	1	4.8%	0	0.0%	6	5.0%	
Totals	21	100.0%	4	19.0%	66	55.0%	
B. Composition of Netanyahu IV cabinet on 1 January 2017							
See previous editions of the <i>Political Data Yearbook</i> for Israel or <a href="http://politicaldatayearbook.com">http://politicaldatayearbook.com</a>							
C. Changes in composition of Netanyahu IV cabinet during 2017							
Ministerial title	Outgoing minister	Outgoing date	Incoming minister	Comments			
Minister of the Economy and Industry	Moshe Kahlon (male 1960, Kulanu)	23 January	Eli Cohen (male 1972, Kulanu)	Moshe Kahlon continued to serve as Finance Minister			
Minister in the Prime Minister's Office	Vacant	23 January	Ayoob Kara (male 1955, Likud)	Kara ceased to hold that post when nominated as Minister of Communications			
Minister of Communications	Benjamin Netanyahu (male 1949, Likud)	21 February	Tzachi Hanegbi (male 1957 Likud)	Netanyahu continued to hold his other posts; Hanegbi served as 'acting' rather than 'full' minister			
Minister of Communications	Tzachi Hanegbi (male 1957 Likud)	29 May	Ayoob Kara (male 1955, Likud)	Kara served as minister in the Prime Minister's Office until 29 May			
Minister of Health	Yakov Litzman (male 1948, United Torah Judaism)	28 November	Benjamin Netanyahu (male 1949, Likud)	Netanyahu continued to hold his other posts			

Table 1. Continue

D. Party/gender composition on 31 December 2017	Seats in cabinet		Seats held by women		Seats in parliament	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	% of party	<i>N</i>	%
Likud	11	52.4%	2	18.8%	30	25.0%
Kulanu	3	14.3%	0	0.0%	10	8.3%
Jewish Home	3	14.3%	1	33.3%	8	6.7%
Shas	2	9.5%	0	0.0%	7	5.8%
Israel Our Home	2	9.5%	1	50.0%	5	4.2%
United Torah Judaism <sup>a</sup>	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	6	5.0%
Totals	21	100.0%	4	19.0%	66	55.0%

Note: <sup>a</sup>Even though the United Torah Judaism party did not have any ministers after 28 November, it still remained part of the government.

Sources: Knesset (n.d.), Diskin and Podoksik (2016), Podoksik and Diskin (2017) and information supplied by the secretary of the government.

Table 2. Party and gender composition of parliament (Knesset) in Israel in 2017

Party	1 January 2017				31 December 2017			
	All		Women		All		Women	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Likud	30	25.0%	7	23.3%	30	25.0%	7	23.3%
Zionist Union	24	20.0%	9	37.5%	24	20.0%	10	41.7%
Joint List	13	10.8%	2	15.4%	13	10.8%	2	15.4%
Yesh Atid	11	9.2%	3	27.3%	11	9.2%	3	27.3%
Kulanu	10	8.3%	4	40.0%	10	8.3%	4	40.0%
Jewish Home	8	6.7%	2	25.0%	8	6.7%	2	25.0%
Shas	7	5.8%	0	0.0%	7	5.8%	0	0.0%
United Torah Judaism	6	5.0%	0	0.0%	6	5.0%	0	0.0%
Israel Our Home	5	4.2%	2	40.0%	5	4.2%	2	40.0%
Meretz	5	4.2%	3	60.0%	5	4.2%	2	40.0%
Single MK – Orly Levi-Abeksis	1	0.8%	1	100.0%	1	0.8%	1	100.0%
Totals	120	100.0%	33	27.5%	120	100.0%	33	27.5%

Sources: Israel Central Elections Committee (n.d.) and Knesset (n.d.).

## Political party report

In April, former Likud MP and Education Minister Gideon Sa'ar announced his political comeback. Sa'ar, who is widely seen as one of Netanyahu's most likely successors, had taken a break from politics in September 2014.

On 10 July, Avi Gabbay was elected chairman of the Labor Party. This election marked a profound change in Israel's political landscape. Once the dominant party in Israeli politics (from the pre-state period to 1977), Labor was historically identified with the ruling elite of East European origin and resented by the underdog migrants from Middle Eastern and North African countries. Gabbay is himself the child of immigrants from Morocco who typically contributed to Menachem Begin's electoral victory in 1977. Before the 2015 elections, Gabbay had co-founded the right-of-centre Kulanu party with current

Table 3. Changes in political parties in Israel in 2017

A. Party institutional changes in 2017
There were no changes during 2017
B. Party leadership changes in 2017
Labor Party leader Isaac Herzog (1960 male) was defeated in the party leadership election by Avraham 'Avi' Gabbay (1967 male) who replaced him on 10 July

Finance Minister (and former Likud MK) Moshe Kahlon. A cabinet member of the fourth Netanyahu government (sworn in May 2015), Gabbay quit the government in May in protest at the appointment of Lieberman as Defense Minister. Gabbay joined the Labor Party in December 2016, half a year before the contest for the party's leadership. His victory against Labor veterans came as a surprise.

Having tried to rebrand Labor as a popular and centrist party, Gabbay was originally perceived as a threat by Yair Lapid, whose Yesh Atid party has been building its political support from the middle ground of Israeli politics. Yet Gabbay is not an MP and can therefore not serve as an opposition leader in the Knesset (a position still filled by former Labor chair Yitzhak Herzog). As of December 2017, Yair Lapid had the upper hand over Avi Gabbay in the polls as the most likely left-of-centre alternative to Netanyahu.

Another issue was the public debate over party primaries following the revelation that thousands of activists had signed up as Likud members to influence the outcome of the party's next primaries. Dubbed 'new Likudniks', those activists claim that their purpose is to elect more moderate and respectable candidates to the party's Knesset list. Their critics claim that the membership drive is a hostile takeover meant to move Likud to the left. The public debate over this phenomenon was a reminder of how easily manipulated party primaries can be. As a result, some have suggested that Israel should adopt 'open lists' to give voters the last word in the composition of the list they vote for on election day (Diskin & Navon 2017).

## Issues in national politics

### *Ongoing terrorism and security threats*

There were over a dozen terrorist attacks in 2017, in which 17 Israelis were killed and 169 injured. On 8 January, a vehicle-ramming terrorist attack in Jerusalem killed four IDF soldiers and injured 15. On 6 April, an IDF soldier was killed in a car-ramming terrorist attack in the West Bank settlement of Ofra. On 14 April, a British tourist was stabbed to death on the Jerusalem tramway. On 16 June, a female IDF soldier was killed in a terrorist attack in Jerusalem. On 14 July, two IDF soldiers were killed in a terrorist attack on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. On 21 July, a Palestinian terrorist stabbed to death a man and two of his young children in the West Bank settlement of Halamish. On 26 September, a Palestinian terrorist shot to death three Israelis in the West Bank settlement of Har Hadar. On 4 October, a Palestinian terrorist stabbed to death an Israeli in the West Bank settlement

of Elkana. On 30 November, an IDF soldier was murdered by two terrorists in the city of Arad.

The height of the tension was in July when the Israeli government decided to install metal detectors at the entrance of the Temple Mount following the murder of two Israeli soldiers on the holy site on 14 July. Precisely because the decision to install metal detectors signalled Israeli sovereignty over the contested site, the Palestinians and the Muslim world were up in arms, and the risks of conflagration were real. The Israeli government eventually decided to back down and remove the detectors.

In addition, Israel continued to face security threats from the northern and southern fronts. In the north, Iran continued to transfer missiles to Hezbollah in Lebanon, and it entrenched its presence in Syria. Israel used its air force against enemy military installations in Syria. In the south, Hamas continued to dig tunnels meant to conduct terrorist attacks in Israel, and to launch ground-to-ground missiles against Israel (IDF n.d.).

### *Controversy over the Azaria affair*

Israeli society continued to be divided over the Azaria affair. On 4 January, a military court convicted IDF soldier Elor Azaria for manslaughter and sentenced him to 18 months of imprisonment and to rank demotion (on 24 March 2016 Azaria had shot a Palestinian terrorist in the head after the latter had already been debilitatingly wounded). On 19 November, President Reuven Rivlin rejected Azaria's pardon request. Both the court's sentence and the President's decision were followed by demonstrations and harsh public statements. A heated debate ensued between those who claimed that the terrorist deserved to die no matter what and those who insisted that Azaria should have respected the IDF's rules of engagement and refrained from killing the wounded assailant.

### *Foreign policy achievements*

The year 2017 was a period of diplomatic achievements for Israel. The swearing in of Trump as US President in January 2017 significantly changed the dynamics of US–Israel relations. Prime Minister Netanyahu was warmly received at the White House in an atmosphere that contrasted with the tense Obama–Netanyahu relationship. In May, President Trump visited Israel. As opposed to his predecessor, Trump did not call for the establishment of a Palestinian state within the pre-1967 lines, and he did not make demands of Israel. He specified that the United States should endorse the two-state solution if it was acceptable to both Israel and the Palestinians. In December, the US government recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital and Trump declared that the United States would transfer its embassy to Jerusalem (for the official Israeli reactions, see Ministry of Foreign Affairs n.d.).

There were important foreign trips by Prime Minister Netanyahu: to Australia and to Singapore; to Liberia (to attend the summit of the Economic Community of Western African States – ECOWAS) and to East Africa (where Israel announced the opening of a new embassy in Rwanda); to Greece (where a tripartite summit was held in Thessaloniki with Cyprus' President and with Greece's Prime Minister to advance the construction of a natural gas pipeline from Israel, via Cyprus and Greece, to Europe); to Hungary (where Israel held a summit with the 'Visegrad Group' of Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic

and Slovakia); to Russia (for Netanyahu and President Vladimir Putin to discuss Israeli-Russian 'deconfliction' in Syria); and to Latin America (Argentina, Columbia and Mexico). In addition, Israel's President Reuven Rivlin was hosted in Madrid by the King of Spain for a state visit to mark 30 years of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

There were also significant visits of foreign heads of governments to Israel. In July, Narendra Modi was the first Indian Prime Minister to pay an official visit to Israel, marking 25 years of diplomatic relations between India and Israel. In October, Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull visited Israel, commemorating the centenary of the conquest of Beer-Sheva from the Turks with Australian troops during the First World War.

### *Other events*

On 1 February, the government evacuated the Amona outpost in the West Bank, as ordered by Israel's High Court of Justice (the Court had ruled, back in December 2014, that the outpost was illegal because it was built on private land, and it gave the government up to two years to evacuate it).

On 28 February, the State Comptroller published his report on the July 2014 war in Gaza between Israel and Hamas (also known as 'Operation Protective Edge'). The report stated that despite Prime Minister Netanyahu's claims to the contrary, he and then Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon did not fully reveal to the security cabinet the extent of the threat emanating from Hamas's cross-border tunnels.

On 14 May, Israel's public broadcasting authority was shut down and replaced by a new public broadcasting authority named 'Kan'. On 29 May, the Knesset repealed the 'journalism order', the 1933 British legislation for Mandatory Palestine that granted the government special powers to monitor Hebrew newspapers.

On 2 July, former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert was released from jail after serving a 16.5-month sentence for corruption. On 28 December, the Knesset passed the 'police recommendation law' which prevents the police from commenting on whether there is an evidentiary basis for the indictment of public officials, but which maintains the right of the Attorney General and of state prosecution to seek police input into the evidence (the law is not retroactive and therefore does not apply to the ongoing investigations of Prime Minister Netanyahu).

### *The economy*

According to the early estimates published in December 2017 by Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, Israel's gross domestic product (GDP) grew by 3.0 per cent in 2017 and its population by 1.9 per cent. The unemployment rate was 4.3 per cent, inflation was 0.24 per cent and the government budget deficit was 2.4 per cent of GDP. Per capita GDP reached US\$40,000 (Bank of Israel n.d., Central Bureau of Statistics n.d.)

## **Sources**

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