

Israel: What's behind the ongoing conflict between Biden and Netanyahu?

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If further proof of the limitations of traditional “representative democracy” was needed, the Israeli political scene provides a prime illustration. Although the Al-Aqsa Flood operation turned the Israeli political climate to the disadvantage of Netanyahu and the ruling bloc that he formed with the Zionist far right at the end of 2022, he is still exerting power, able to retain it constitutionally until 2026. Netanyahu managed to absorb some of the Israeli popular anger that held him responsible for failing to prevent the armed attack that took place on 7 October, by creating a small “war cabinet” with the participation of one of the two main poles of the Zionist opposition. This allowed him to appear as a man keen on Zionist “national unity” in confronting the Palestinian people. .

In addition to the political dimension of the manoeuvre, Netanyahu wanted to involve his political opponents in the responsibility of managing the onslaught on the Gaza Strip. He did so by involving two men who had assumed the position of chief of staff of the Israeli army successively between 2011 and 2019, namely Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot, both of whom belong to the National Unity opposition bloc in the Knesset. The war cabinet embodied the revengeful Zionist consensus that led to the destruction of Gaza and the extermination of about fifty thousand of its residents so far, with the help of the United States.

But the Zionist consensus represented by that war cabinet ended when the reoccupation of the Gaza Strip was completed and the question of its political fate came to the fore. At this point, the war cabinet got divided on the position to adopt regarding the “settlement” sought by Joe Biden and the US administration that he heads. This “settlement” consists in combining fragments of the territory of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank into a “Palestinian state” nominally governed by a slightly modified “Palestinian Authority”. The Strip would be subject to joint Israeli and Arab (primarily Egyptian) military supervision. While the Zionist opposition supports this “settlement”, Netanyahu cannot declare his acceptance of it without breaking the alliance he made with the far right, thus becoming dependent on what his current political opponents may decide about him.

The problem for Netanyahu is that the balance of power is completely different between the two cases. While the participation of his “neo-Nazi” allies in government depends on him, as they could not have dreamed of that participation had it not been for Netanyahu’s profound opportunism and his willingness to do anything in order to remain in power (and avoid trial), the Zionist opposition can look forward to assuming power without him through early parliamentary elections, with good hope to obtain a majority in the Knesset. Indeed, since Al-Aqsa Flood, opinion polls in Israel indicate that the opposition is more popular than the current ruling bloc.

Netanyahu’s manoeuvre to include his rivals in the war cabinet, coupled with his appearance as a

stubborn defender of the Zionist interest in the face of US pressure, succeeded in somewhat changing the direction of public opinion. Two polls published a few days ago showed an increase in Netanyahu's popularity, accompanied by a decline in the popularity of his rival Gantz from the peak it reached following Al-Aqsa Flood and his joining the war cabinet in the name of Zionist national unity. That is because Gantz began to bear with Netanyahu the responsibility for the failure to eliminate armed resistance inside the Gaza Strip after eight months of frenzied aggression, in the absence of a clear vision regarding "the day after", as Gaza's political and security fate is now called. This new trend in Israeli public opinion was certainly a key factor in Gantz's decision to end his participation in the war cabinet.

However, polls still indicate a possible defeat for the existing alliance between Likud, Netanyahu's party, and the "neo-Nazis" in the face of the opposition blocs. While one of the two recent polls indicates that the opposition could win a majority of the Knesset seats (61 out of 120), the other indicates that it would need three seats in order to achieve that goal. These seats might be provided by the Islamic Arab bloc led by Mansour Abbas, who has been continuously expressing his willingness to continue partaking in the Zionist political game, or by one of the Zionist groups affiliated with the current ruling coalition, or any other small Knesset blocs.

Therefore, Netanyahu will not risk breaking his alliance with the Zionist far right and facing the possibility of an early electoral battle, unless he obtains gains and guarantees, especially about ending his judicial troubles. He can remain in power with his allies despite polls confirming that they have become a minority in the country, even though the current period is one of the most serious that the Zionist state has gone through so far during its short history. Netanyahu is also clearly betting on the possibility of Donald Trump winning the US presidential elections that will take place in early November.

All this is a source of great embarrassment for Biden, who needs to achieve the "settlement" he is seeking before the elections. That is why the US administration invited Yoav Galant, the Minister of Defence in the current Zionist government, and Netanyahu's rival within the Likud Party itself, to visit Washington in the coming days, before Netanyahu comes to deliver a fourth speech before the US Congress on July 24 (which, incidentally, is a privilege that no other foreign head of state has ever received in US history). No doubt that the Biden administration is exploring ways to pressure Netanyahu through Gallant, including the possibility of the latter defecting from Netanyahu with a number of Likud members of Knesset that would be sufficient to topple the current government and force new elections.

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P.S.

• Blog. 6/18/2024:

<https://gilbert-achcar.net/behind-the-ongoing-conflict>

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