

## Richard Pater - Briefing on the Upcoming Israeli General Election with Richard Pater, CEO of BICOM

- Very warm welcome back everybody. It is my great pleasure to introduce Richard Pater and Carly Maisel, who will be in discussion regarding the Israeli general elections. So before I hand over to them, I briefly want to introduce Richard. Richard has over 15 years experience working alongside government officials, diplomats, and journalists. He regularly briefs British audiences on Israeli politics and security issues. He has appeared on the BBC and has written in a range of publications. He's also responsible for the delegations BICOM brings to Israel.

*Visuals are displayed throughout the presentation*

Richard joined BICOM from the Israeli Prime Minister's office where he spearheaded the engagement with the foreign press. Following the second Lebanon war, he received the Prime Minister's prize for excellence. Richard served in the IDF army brigade where he twice received commendations and continues to serve in the reserves. He holds a BA in Philosophy and Politics from Manchester University. Welcome, Richard. Thank you very, very much for joining us today. We are very much looking forward to your presentation, and we are lucky to have our wonderful Carly with us. So I'm now going to hand over to the two of you, looking forward. Thank you.

- Thank you very much, Wendy. So Richard, it's great to be back together again. I'm just sad I can't get to do this live with you in Israel. So we're going to take the next hour and see how much we can decode the upcoming Israeli election for our audience. Don't worry, I'm not expecting you to have a crystal ball. As we all know, Israeli elections are known for their surprises. But first of all, how did we get to our fourth election in two years?

- Okay, thank you Carly. And thank you very much, Wendy, indeed for hosting me. Okay, so let's kind of try and make order of where we are and why we're going to the elections. And just a little bit of a quick recap for the audience. People would be aware that on the third time of the elections exactly almost a year ago today, the, in the context of the coronavirus provided a convenient excuse for the two big parties. Likud and Blue and White led by Netanyahu and Gantz respectively, to come together to form a national unity government to deal with the health and economic crisis that was facing the country. This was a very bloated government, 36 government ministers, several deputy ministers. In terms, this was a representative, a third of the legislature, which is enormous, enormous number. And the government basically was built on a lack of trust from the beginning, very convoluted deal involving the status and new status of alternate prime minister, which we can talk about why it was relevant, but it's, so, the short answer is it related to Netanyahu's trials to allow him to remain as prime minister without having to resign his position.

But this all came, it came to crashing down rather quickly. And primarily because they couldn't pass a budget. They first couldn't pass a budget in the summer. By Israeli law, you need to pass

on by 100 days of creating new governments. They create, they passed special legislation to extend it to December. And when that failed, we basically went to elections. But just a couple of anecdotes around the end of December, which kind of sums it up. One was that lead, the lead up to that vote, both Netanyahu and Gantz were in negotiations and Netanyahu's criteria condition for passing the budget would've been to remove some of the powers of the justice minister, Blue and White Minister, Gantz was kind of, had, was national interest at heart. I think it's fair to say that he wanted, in the time of Corona to pass a budget to show some national responsibility and even considered weakening the powers of the justice minister. This was enough, by the way, even two weeks later for the Justice Minister have a lack of faith in his own boss and resigned. But then by then, it was too late. The other incident, which is a kind of amusing but fascinating was on the night of the vote, when it came to the third reading to give this week extension to the budget and negotiations, a combined move by Gideon Saar who'd already left by then and Yair Lapid, the head of the opposition, came together to get one of the Likud rebels and three Blue and White back benchers to switch their votes.

In fact, the Blue and White, the Likud MK, she had told the party whip that she was ill at home, when in fact she was hiding in the car park of the Knesset. And when it came to be to the third, to the third vote, she suddenly appeared in the chamber and voted against the government and it was her vote. And the three Blue and White back benchers as well for the rest of the party abstained but came in and voted against that, basically brought the government down. And just to note, this is the second occasion that we're aware of at least where Sal and Lapid worked together. The first time was actually for the election of, of President Rivlin, which is elected by the Knesset against the wishes of Netanyahu. So they have a good track record of working together. I'm sure we can go on and discuss perhaps the potential of them working together again in the future.

- Thanks. So you've used a lot of different names there and though we, although we have a fair number of our audience who I'm sure are familiar with Israeli politics, the almost a thousand devices on the line. I wonder if you can just give us a who's who, so you know, a quick run through of who are the heads of each party and what they stand for.

- [Richard] Of course. So the lead candidate or the front runner in these things is Prime Minister Netanyahu, who is Israel's longest serving prime minister leading the Likud party. He's actually facing obviously a candidate for Prime Minister. There are three other candidates that are presenting themselves to the Israeli public, the electorate as candidates for Prime Minister, one I've, two, I've already mentioned Yair Lapid, who is currently the head of the opposition. He represents a centrist liberal secular party. He gained kind of some credibility at least when his former partner, Benny Gantz joined the government. Lapid insisted on staying out because he didn't think it was appropriate to sit with Netanyahu 'cause he was under, he was under charges of his corruption charges. So, he stayed out. His principles are basically anti-corruption, transparency, and promoting some, I would say some Western liberal values. And this is what's one of the interesting aspects of this campaign is that this time he faces two prime ministerial potential wannabe candidates from the right wing, who I would say are probably out flanking him

to the right. One is Gideon Saar who left the Likud party.

He actually stood against Netanyahu as leader of the party last year and gained a credible 27, 28%, which against the incumbent Prime Minister is not too bad. He's taken with him a lot of, well, about half a dozen or so formerly Likudniks as well. Perhaps most significantly is Ze'ev Elkin, who up until recently was one of the chief close confidants of Prime Minister Netanyahu. He actually had served as coalition chairman during 2009 to 2013. Government never lost a vote, which is quite rare and impressive and also just as impressive, that was one of the last governments that lasted its full term. So that was thanks to the political skills of Elkin who are now being deployed by Gideon Saar. He was also, by the way, accompanied Prime Minister Netanyahu on his trips to Moscow to meet with President Putin, served as his translator and his confidant. So that's quite a blow from Netanyahu to lose someone so close to him. Also joining Saar is Sasha Beaton, the former chairman of the Corona Committee that kind of went up against the government a few months ago when the whole debate was about opening or closing certain aspects of the economy.

And so they're running on a right wing traditional ticket, but I would say with more stateliness with respect to things like the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary probably more synonymous with kind of traditional Likud values of being right-wing national, but also liberal. The fourth candidate for Prime Minister is Naftali Bennett, who again has been a part of Netanyahu's team in the past. He represents the Yemina party, which deals with kind of mainstream settlers and national religious. Naftali Bennett is perhaps the modern day poster boy of Israel. And when I say that, I imply that his background, he has a very impressive military career serving as a commander in one of the elites commando units. He also then is a self-made man making millions in the high tech. And so those two impressive background before politics are kind of what Israeli's, modern day Israelis look up to. The kind of, the idea of the exit is out there as kind of the main aspiration for lots of capitalist minded Israelis.

So these are the four candidates for Prime Minister, although it should be noted, and we can show you afterwards the kind of where they're polling, whether it's realistic to expect parties which are kind of in just over double digits to be representing a prime minister or candidate. Just very quickly I'll represent the other kind of spectrum of political views. And within the blocks on Netanyahu side supporting him are the Ultra-Orthodox parties, one representing Ashkenazi Jews, one representing Shafardi Jews and another hard right party called the religious Zionists. And on the left in the opposition is the Labour Party, which has seen a resurgence under the new leader Merav Michaeli to the left of their Meretz. And then the Joint List, which is traditionally representing the Israeli com-, Israeli Arab communities. And there's also Avigdor Lieberman, who is also kind of centrist, liberal, anti-religious, but right wing hawkish. And he traditionally represents the Russian immigrant vote.

- Thank you. And this is an irony for me to say, but slow down a little as we have people all over the world with a variety of languages and many of the people who know me well will laugh at the fact that I've just asked you to slow down. But if you bear that in mind, so tell us what are the

key topics that voters are thinking about as they go to the polls? You know, what is it that you think is going to drive how people vote?

- So as people, you may know that we have here the list system, so people, when people vote, they vote for the party, which the list is already laid out. And that lends itself to a large degree of personality politics. So the personalities of the leader is often one of the most dominant aspects of it. Again, that's why I put the emphasis on the candidates to Prime Minister, because people want to say who is going to be leading the country and therefore, generally, policies take a second or lower down priority because, in any event, there is going to be a coalition government. So it's more important that people choose the personalities and the ideologies that these parties represent to be, to give them the boost and then the policies kind of work themselves out afterwards. Just an example of that, the Likud party doesn't even bother publishing a manifesto anymore because they understand that they are, they are partly reliant or it's a great deal, reliance on the culture personality of their leaders. But having said that, I think one of the major issues clearly is about the, how each party or the leader would deal with the coronavirus, both in terms of its economic and health implications.

- Thank you. I think you dropped about one point there. We're going to ask you to drop about three points in the speed. So take a breath in between. So the Covid-19 effect is something that, you know is happening around the world and is starting to, you know, affect elections all over. Now Dan Senior's coined a term of, you know, vaccination nation when he talks about Israel, and that's been grabbing the headlines a lot. But actually at home in Israel, whilst everyone's very happy with the vaccination rollout, they have a lot of other complaints about the way the government's dealt with Covid-19. Do you think Netanyahu can ride this vaccination wave or are those other complaints going to be front and centre in people's minds?

- So this is a great question because this is kind of where a lot of, where the undecided voters may well be determined. There's no doubt that Netanyahu is playing on the fact that he brought the vaccines to the country and is leading the world in inoculations as a huge boost for his credibility. And a key part of his campaign, today I saw some statistical studies that showed out of over 1500 Facebook posts by Netanyahu, over 60% were related to the vaccines exclusively, which kind of shows the emphasis and impact that he's putting on that, he clearly was hoping. When we go back to when the election were called December, January, that by now the the whole country would be coming out of it and that the economy would've opened up and therefore, there would be an economic dividend to his success as well. Clearly the partly as a result of the British strain or the variant here that delayed plans to a full opening, and even though we did just open up yesterday, they already talked suggestions from some health ministry officials that we may again be in lockdown before we go to elections. So Netanyahu, in short, will very much seem to capitalise on the vaccines. Although, as you've mentioned, the lack of differentiation, the lack of ability to control certain aspects of the public in keeping with the, keeping with the laws and what was seen as kind of an imbalance to the implementation of the law authorities certainly leaves a bitter taste for a lot of people.

- So do you think, before we get into the other players around the table, how does Netanyahu enter this election? You know, he's managed to get a further delay in his corruption case that now won't start again until April, you know, does he enter this election in a strong position or, you know, are the spectres of the past haunting him?

- Well, I'd say he comes into this campaign a little battered and bruised because of the failure of this government and also as some of his partners have left him down. I'm primarily referring to the Ultra-Orthodox and their lack of ability to follow the guidelines and the laws has a knock on effect for him because they are quote unquote his natural partners. But still, but Netanyahu shows an amazing tenacity for the fight. You wouldn't believe that he's bruised by looking at him. He's kind of full, full of gungho, full of kind of inventive campaigns and, you know, he loves his quirky videos that are very, very popular here. But more than anything else, Netanyahu is referred to as the magician when it comes to politics because he loves that manipulation of other parties. And I think in the past we've seen the way that he's put parties together and then dismantled other parties, the latest kind of crashing of Blue and White. It's probably just the best and nearest example that we have of Netanyahu being able to destroy credibility of one of his rivals.

And on this occasion, he's already pulled off two fascinating moves, one of which is to ensure that the hard right party will get over the threshold. You know, for these small parties we have an electoral threshold of 3.25%, which is the equivalent of four seats. And Netanyahu's main concern is to have any votes wasted on the right. So therefore he was insistent in the campaign that the collection of three very small right wing parties, the No Arm Faction, which is basically a homophobic religious party. The Jewish Power Party, which is a hardline racist party, and Smochtrich who is probably a bit of both kind of combined together and form the Religious Zionists. And that's certainly to Netanyahu's credit that he's putting that package together. And what's doubly fascinating at the same time that he's playing with the right wing, the hard right, he's also on a real charm offensive with the Israeli Arab communities.

And I think this is worth dwelling on for a moment just because I think they have a fascinating role in this election. But in short in the politics, we have a, we had until recently, the Joint List which represented the Arab population are made up of four components and the four components within that party. And this also shows the elasticity of Israeli democracy is that you have a communist party. And for people that are interested, I, BICOM have a regular podcast where I've interviewed several candidates and when I asked the member from the Communist Party 2021, are you still kind of happy to call yourself a communist? She pushed back very clearly to say yes, out and proud, loud. That's a, it's an important part of our identity. So we have a fully functioning communist faction within the Joint List.

We also have Pan Arabis that up until recently were supporting Assad and his regime in Syria holding rallies for them in Haifa. And then the third component are Palestinian nationalists, kind of alongside secular Arab nationalists as well. The fourth group, which are no longer running with them are the Islamist party. And the Islamist party has actually been having a relationship

with the Likud party in Parliament so that if the Islamists actually happen to get over the threshold, it's not impossible that along with the hard right Jewish parties, the Islamist party will also be endorsing Netanyahu. And if you're interested, I can give more reasons as to why, why that's the case and what's going on there.

- Well, it's never dull in the Israeli elections, that's for sure. So let's keep having the discussion about the Israeli Arabs. You know, I saw that Netanyahu visited the Bedwin community yesterday, you know, and you saw him, you know, sitting with their traditional leadership and they commented that they enjoy and like Netanyahu, but the, his government hasn't been good to them. And, you know, the Bedwin population often see themselves as marginalised, unsupported, a lot of their areas remain unrecognised. Why would the, the Bedwin leadership think that Netanyahu is good for them?

- Well, I'll answer that and say, first of all, one needs to make a distinction sometimes between the political leadership and the Israeli Arab population and the Bedwin leaders that he represented are more reflected and representative of that second group. And if you listen to the Israeli Arab population and these leaders that Netanyahu met with, they're looking really for three things, which they don't find adequate representation within the Joint List party. The first is that for the majority of them, they want integration into Israeli society. They see the benefits of being kind of in the modern, as we call it, the startup nation. And it's only appropriate, right? And appropriate their community see some of the dividends of that as well and enjoy that integration. The second thing is that they are fed up of their, the Arab politicians remaining as marginal places on the political playing field, constantly in the opposition, constantly in the background or as back benchers. And so they want politicians that really have influence and can have a real say in government policy.

And I think the third aspect is, we saw recently when the Knesset ratified the Abraham Accords, that there was almost unanimous support across the Jewish and Zionist parties and only the Israeli Arab parties voted against the deal. And that's, and in distinction and in contradiction to the desires of the majority of the Israeli Arab Republic that recognise that the Abraham Accords present a fantastic opportunity for them to be the bridge between Israeli society and the wider Arab world. Now, as I've mentioned, so Netanyahu is acutely aware of that and really thinks that there are votes in there. In fact, for the first time ever, he's placed a Muslim Arab candidate on the Likud list. And he really thinks that by breaking up this Joint List and covertly supporting the Islamists, that they have a chance to kind of, to break off some of that domination of the Joint List.

- Well, thanks to the Israeli media, it wasn't particularly covertly supporting the Islamists, but yes, it'll be interesting to watch the space on what comes next. So let's talk about-

- Let me just, let me just add. Can I just come back? I mean, you're absolutely right. It's not cover, I'm just thinking of a few examples where in this last Knesset, the Islamists broke rank with the Joint List to support Netanyahu. And they did, so when they were choosing the Knesset

state controller, they voted with Netanyahu's candidates fascinating as well. They voted with Netanyahu against the rest of the opposition when it came to launching an inquiry into what's referred to as the submarines affair. They also, they were witness Netanyahu. And third of all on that vote I described on that evening on the, on December, which brought down the government, unlike the rest of the opposition, the joint, the Islamic faction abstained from that vote, which also meant that the government collapsed. So there is a lot of evidence parliamentary wise that they are, that they're very much connected and working together.

- You and I have both spent time with Benny Gantz and commented that really, he's just too nice a guy to be in Israeli politics. So, you know, we've seen him put national interests first and unfortunately, we've seen that not get him very far, you know, just for us, let's talk about Benny Gantz for a second. What do you think his mistakes were? Was there any way to save this from going into the government and do you think he comes out of this with any form of political party?

- Well, let me first of all say two things in Benny Gantz's defence. When he took a, when he entered that coalition agreement last year, and by the way, from his perspective, at least on paper, it was a relatively good deal in the sense that him and his partners controlled some of the key ministries. He was defence minister, his number two, Gabby Ashkenazi was Foreign Minister, was, was Justice minister. These are three of the most impactful and significant roles within Israeli government. And I think in two aspects, they did have a reasonable and positive impact in, with the case of the Justice Minister Nissenkorn, he was able to prevent any disturbances or infringements into the process of Prime Minister Netanyahu's trial and kind of protected the legal system that shouldn't be taken for granted in the current political climate. And I think when it comes to foreign policy, you can see the best example that when the Americans were considering in last summer, debating the issues of extension of sovereignty, annexation of the West Bank, that suddenly American leaders, Pompeo, Kushner, et cetera, when they came to Israel, they didn't just meet with Netanyahu, they sat with Gantz and Ashkenazi and they heard very different messages from them.

And so to an extent whether or not we can debate whether the annexation debate was ever real in an implementable way, the fact is that Benny Gantz stood there as a very important barrier to make it quite clear that it wasn't in the consensus of the government and wasn't to be followed through. Now, is any of this going to help him in the election campaign? Unlikely. He's now vote, he's now really campaigning on what I think is best called a sympathy vote. And judging by Israelis, I don't think people vote for sympathy candidates when it comes to the end of the day. And so the Blue and White party is one of three other parties which are just on that cusp at the moment of the polls, they're on about four or five seats, but there is a real risk that he won't get through. Now it's part of this sympathy vote, Benny Gantz is saying, and this is speculation, we can unpack it if you like, that he is saying, if he's not reelected, the first thing that Netanyahu will do in an interim government on the day after is to sack Benny Gantz and all the Blue and White ministers because they're no longer members of Knesset.

So therefore why should they even be in the interim government? Now I'm not convinced that's

a good enough reason to vote for them. And this whole question is, will come under the scrutiny of the Attorney General to see is it even legal for them to be sacked by Netanyahu. But this is another kind of part of the ongoing constitutional crisis that we have here. And I think he does deserve some credit for his role in defending the system.

- And how much is he hanging on through this in the hope that the next election doesn't have the effect that everyone's hoping and doesn't lead to a government and that he himself could end up being Prime Minister based on the old deal if he stays around?

- Yes, I mean I, that is a, that's a working theory. And just to remind people that the idea was that under the alternate arrangement agreement signed last year, that by November 2021 would become the rotation point where Benny Gantz would take over. Clearly if he's no longer a member of Knesset, it would be very difficult for him to argue the case that he deserves that chance. But if we are in a situation of deadlock, and I suppose God forbid that we do go to a fifth, a fifth round, then Benny Gantz, if he is still there as a Knesset member, theoretically at least could be in a position to take over and to be, have that alternative agreement honoured. But I think we're in very difficult legal ground because it's not clear whether after an election that deal still is, has relevance.

- So we touched on the role of the Israeli Arabs and the Arab list. Let's talk about the Ultra-Orthodox, you know, often considered key if you are looking to form a coalition. Now, you know, during COVID 19 there's been a lot of tension in Israeli society between the Ultra-Orthodox and the secular and a strong feeling that the Ultra-Orthodox haven't stuck to the rules and if anything have become, you know, a state of themselves with it. And the levels of tensions are things that, you know, I've not seen in a long time. And the question really is, how's that going to play out in the election? You know, is there any possibility of having a coalition without the Ultra-Orthodox and what, where do you see them landing?

- So I think in broad terms, the vote of the Ultra-Orthodox party is pretty stable. If we separate them out for a moment. The United Torah Judaism, UTJ, which represents Ashkenazi Judaism by the way, both Hasidic Jews and Lidvaka, Ultra-Orthodox are within the same party and they are, more or less, represented by their population of Ultra-Orthodox Ashkenazi Jews. And so you see them at 6 or 7% relatively relative to their size of the population. With Shas, it's a little bit more interesting. They are the Ultra-Orthodox Sephardic party. And although they also rely on their base support from Ultra-Orthodox sephardim, they also play identity politics perhaps better than any other party. And so are able to galvanise support from other non Ultra-Orthodox sephardim as well that identify with the banner that they raise of kind of raising the pride of the Sephardic community. Now, in terms of where they sit in the coalition, it's pretty clear that they are both, I mean, Netanyahu has already asked them to sign loyalty oaths that they will go with Netanyahu and they have, and they've both, duly signed them.

Although, I should caution that any of these deals signed before the elections are not worth that much on the day after when the kind of the numbers come into bearing. So at the moment they



are kind of fully on the Netanyahu's camp, but there is a scenario, and for example, Gideon Saar has also had very close relationships with the leaders of both the Ultra-Orthodox parties. He knows how to work with them, he has a level of trust with them and it's mutual. So it is possible that he could persuade them to jump ship of the Likud, and to join them. However, in your question, you are rightly, you rightly ascertain that there is a lot of animosity and anger not towards necessarily the Ultra-Orthodox population. I think that's, that would be a little crude, but certainly in the fact of their, the kind of their longstanding overt control and disproportional influence over the system. And a lot of people, lot of the parties for example, we've mentioned and also, a big in particular, are making a very reasonable and strong case that the next government needs to be without Ultra-Orthodox because it, because of their unnecessary influence over mainstream Israeli society.

And for example, one of the basic ideas is that if the Yeshiva and the religious schools want to receive state funding, then it's the necessity to teach the core subjects of the sciences, of maths, even of a foreign language of English. So that they're raising people that can be a valuable entity within the Israeli workforce when they eventually, when they eventually grow up. You've seen the demographic numbers that are hugely in favour of the Ultra-Orthodox and the Arabs as well, by the way. And so there's a necessity that when this, these kids grow up and reach adult age, that they're able to contribute to society. And that's a very important aspect for many people.

- So one of the things that Netanyahu's relied on in previous elections is his close relationship with the American administration and his personal relationship with former President Trump. Now obviously we've had a change in administration and, you know, there was quite a lot of speculation about whether or not the Biden call to Netanyahu was delayed because of potential electioneering. And the Biden administration is being very careful not to end up in the local election cycle. Now, you know, Martin Indic had a funny quote where when Netanyahu kept saying, well, he's known Biden for decades and he's comfortable in their relationship. You know, Indic said that also means Biden's known Netanyahu for decades and comfortable with who Netanyahu is.

Now, you know, Martin Indic's a democrat and no Netanyahu fan, but there is some who say that, you know, perhaps the length of time they've known each other isn't going to help Netanyahu here. Iran is coming up again on the agenda and it's something that in the past, Netanyahu could have pushed to rely on Trump for. It's not clear yet what role the US administration is going to take. And there's obviously a lot of concern in Israel. Has the US election damaged Netanyahu's chances for reelection? And do you think that that the US has any kind of role here?

- So I think first of all, it's clear that Netanyahu certainly would've preferred another Trump term. That's clear because of the unprecedented closeness of the relations that they were able to push through and what is perceived at least as a pro-Israel agenda. I think Biden, I mean we should also take a step back for a moment and say that Israel-US relations and Prime

Minister-President relations are one of Israeli media's favourite soap operas as an ongoing, running story here. So for every day when the call from Biden didn't come through to Netanyahu kind of, it raised the level of expectations. I personally take a slightly more dim view of this, that I think that the essential relationship between the two countries are based on a lot more than just the personal ties of the principles and that they are deep and meaningful through a whole range of security and intelligence sharing apparatus. And I think that Biden, by making that call, I mean also don't forget that in previous campaigns, Netanyahu also always used to rely on a trip to Washington a month or a few weeks before an election. The photo op in the Oval Office does him no harm at all. That's where, that's Netanyahu's comfort zone. And clearly this visit wouldn't have, wasn't going to happen anyway because of Corona and it's questionable without Corona, we can only speculate whether it would come, but I think it's reasonable to assume that Biden is not going to get involved directly with these things.

He had the protocol phone call, he's now going to leave it and probably wait 'till after the elections. And I think Biden will be able to work with any of the potential candidates for Prime Minister and they're all going to be able to see eye to eye in the broader sense. When it comes to Iran, and this is interesting 'cause it kind of relates to a question you were asking earlier about kind of the policy issues. I think from my perspective, there is almost a consensus certainly within the Jewish Zionist parties across the board that there is a, that Iran is a very serious threat both in terms of its nuclear ambition and its role army Hezbollah and the Shia proxies in Syria. And everyone understands that that needs to be dealt with, with a combination of hard power and kinetic force as well as diplomatic efforts with the US. Similarly, I mean the Palestinian issue is just not on the agenda at all this time. And although the parties kind of take their traditional positions, vis a vis left and right on the Israeli political spectrum regarding how they feel toward the Palestinians because we are so far away from any realistic progress on that front, it's a non-issue.

And so it's, it can almost be discounted. And similarly the campaigns, what Israel refers to here is the campaigns between the wars, , what Israeli Air Force carries out on a regular basis over the skies of Syria. These are also kind of consensus issues within the broad strokes of all the parties. And so I don't see that that's not going to be an issue beforehand and I think that everyone there is a high level of faith within the security establishment, the IDF, the Mosad, the Shimbet to understand, to work together with any political leader of the day, to continue to work on Israel's interest, both in terms of the regional aspect and with the Americans.

- So let's turn our attention now to a party that's had a recent revival. So Israel's Labour party, the party of the country's founding leaders and for decades, its ruling party has really struggled in the last few elections and to be honest, had all but disappeared. And Merav Michaeli who's been around a long time in Israeli politics, has finally managed to take the mantle of the party and we are now seeing a revival. What do you think is the future for the Israeli Labour party?

- So before I answer that, let me just take a step back and remind ourselves. Last time round they ran as a technical block along with the Meretz party, which is to the left of them and Ali who

represents the Gecher party. And together they had seven seats. As part of the campaign, the labour leader at the time, Amir Parrot, who is one of the longest serving parliamentarians, he has a big bushy moustache, he shaved it off as part of an election gimmick to say, I've shaved off my moustache so you can all read my lips. I will not sit with Netanyahu. Six months later and after the next election, what does he do? He joined Netanyahu's government as part of the Blue and White block. So those three, out of those three Labour Mks, two of them became ministers in Netanyahu's government. And it was only Merav Michaeli that stayed out as a single faction of the Labour Party in the opposition. Now she has been elected leader and it also should be noted that Labour was the only party to carry out open primaries to choose their list. Likud usually does that, but again, because of the coronavirus it was seen as inappropriate and logistically very difficult.

So Merav Michaeli combines both being a credible leader that has proven not to go into government with Netanyahu, she's credible on the kind of the two flags The Labour Party traditionally waves on kind of issues towards the peace process and towards human rights as well as socioeconomic policy. And she's chosen a list which is a combination of some credible old timers and some refreshing new faces as well. And so she has seen this where people were maybe quick to say that the party was anachronistic and into the dustbin of history. She has been able to revive it and now they're doing relatively credible, I mean relative, let's be honest here on a, on kind of six to seven seats. So they're not breaking any records, but at least they will survive. But there is a catch here because at the same time that labour is doing better, it now pushes their partner sister party Meretz, who are slightly further to the left. They now face real problems, real issues of getting over the threshold.

And as I mentioned, the unlike last time round where you had these two blocks of Likud and Blue and White, there are four parties which are close to this threshold. The Meretz party, the Blue and White party, the Ram party and the religious Zionist on the right. And the question about those four parties, which of those make it over the threshold could have a significant bearing on the overall picture come the day after.

- So you touched on Meretz and you know, we know political leaders like to grab headlines, but I did happen to notice that the Meretz leader supported the ICC announcement that it was going to investigate Israel, you know, Meretz is to the left, but where do you see that position playing out in Israeli politics?

- It was a fascinating decision that Nitzan Horowitz made to make that statement. I think more than anything else, it speaks to his desperation to A, remain relevant within the debate. Even saying, even by saying something as controversial as that, you know, it's the old adage that there's no such thing as bad publicity. At least he gets his name recognition and the party out there 'cause otherwise they just weren't in the debate. So I think it speaks to kind of some desperation and concern and to take a slightly provocative position, which may well play well with their niche supporters, but certainly won't win him any friends within mainstream Israel.

- So let's start to look at what the potential voting blocks and the polling looks like. So, you know, if the election was held tomorrow, who would win and what might their coalition make up look like?

- Okay, so I've actually got a, I've got a quick infographic which maybe is worth sharing just to give an idea of where the latest polls are 'cause I think that gives a, like this gives a useful idea and as we understand, 120 seat chamber, the magic number to reach is at least 61 to have a governing coalition. And at the moment, even though it says on the left, you can see opposing Netanyahu is 62, that's slightly disingenuous because the Joint List would not sit with some of those other parties, which are basically the right wing blue parties of, of New Hope and Beitenu. So what we can see by this graph, and these are kind of the, our amalgamated numbers, but they will obviously, these are just projections. The what's key here is that Yamina, Naftali Bennett's party is, has the potential to be the king's maker that because he is not committed to go either with or against the Netanyahu camp, he has the potential of joining the opposition and then you could cut away the Joint List.

And although that requires a very broad stream of across the spectrum of Israeli politics from the hard left we've just discussed Meretz through to Yamina and New hope, that is one scenario or Netanyahu is hoping that he can, in the last few days, he counts as often the polls low ball the Likud party. And if he can get up to 30, 31, 32 seats where he wants to be and then being able to take in Yamina as well over the 61, then he would probably be offer willing to offer Bennett, I dunno, I dunno what, but if anything, it would be the most tantalising offer, even a rotation prime ministership, defence minister, giving back to the justice ministry, there will be no shortage of offers to be able to prime Bennett to persuade him to come back home as he will see it to the hard right party. And similar, there will be an opportunity for the centrist parties in the non-Netanyahu camp to offer Naftali Bennett its similar offers in order to prize him away from that and to bring him into the, and to finally defeat Netanyahu.

- So what do you see as the most likely outcome? I won't ask you to have a crystal ball, but you know, there's a reason that people say Netanyahu, you know, is the chameleon of Israeli politics and every time he manages to pull it out the bag, you know, is that the direction you see this going in and as we've seen in the past, you can win an election and lose the coalition formation.

- For sure. I mean, so this is, I mean it's, there are still, it's still going to be too close to call. I don't think we, we just don't know. Netanyahu, as I said, will definitely look to galvanise his support. It's referred to often here as the Gavalt Campaign, that's kind of to push hard to say you won't be tied if you don't vote for me, you're going to get X, X, Y and Z. And he is trading on the fact to his supporters that not only did he bring the vaccines, not, I mean he also brought four peace treaties in the last year, which by the way is significant and has the support, but he also deserves some significant part of that credit. So they're the messages that we're going to still see Netanyahu to ram home today, he's kind of emphasising his leadership over the economy by the way. He tried to bring a new budgetary plan to help the unemployed and to help small businesses and self-employed people.

But it's been knocked back by the Attorney General because it's been called just, you can't, you can't just hand out money prior to an election. It's just not the done thing. And so they've been, he's been trading insults with the IP today over who was the worst finance minister, him or his successor who is now with Billy Ku. So it's a little bit infantile and childish, the debate. But this is where it is incidentally from Lapid's strategy is not usually to take the bait on these things because he doesn't want to stir up that crowd, which the Likud is looking to exactly to fire them up into and to bring back people that are maybe apathetic or maybe staying home on election day. And so this has resulted in a rather let's say dull campaign until now, but we still have two weeks left for the fireworks to come.

But Lapid wants to play it slow and steady. His main messaging is about forming a sane government and talking all about the transparency and anti-corruption issues, et cetera and kind of other issues which kind of relate to Middle Israel. So it's going to be fascinating to see which of those blocks kind of wins out. One other thing just to mention is that you can see there is a real lack, unlike traditional Israeli elections, there's a real lack of former senior military men. The last election you remember, the Blue and White party was led by three former chief of staffs. There is a common trend out of the last 14 chief of staffs, 10 of them have gone into politics. And this time, instead of former generals, we can see Yesh Atid, Labour, Meretz. They're all being led by former journalists actually, which is also an interesting part where the Israeli public gained their credibility through the mode of television. And that's how they're now their leaders have come to the forefront as all former journalists.

- So a lot of the names you've mentioned tonight are not new to many of our viewers. You know, there's something that you always see in Israel about, to be honest, recycling old politicians. It's been quite a long time since we've had anybody new appear on the screen. Is there anyone up and coming that you see as the future of Israeli politics? Or are we doomed to have the same conversation in a few years time where it's Lapid, it's Bennett, it's Netanyahu?

- Well, it's an interesting question. I don't think, I'm trying to identify any really new, exciting people and that's a bit a shame that you're right, that it is rather the regurgitated people. But I will say, but so for some of these people like Gideon Saar, he has served, I mean he served as prime ministers Netanyahu's cabinet secretary back in the first governments at the end of the nineties. He's served Netanyahu's government as interior minister and education minister, but has never been tested further up from that. So in the extent that he is also kind of the blood of the blood of the Likud. But running on a campaign where he said, you know, he did an Israeli talk show where hosted by the ex footballer Ial Berkovic actually, and he was asked to on live TV, you know, will you sign this declaration that whatever happens you will not go into a government with Netanyahu?

And he signed it and obviously the Likud had a field day after that saying, you know, is this a candidate for Prime Minister that gets bullied by a talk show host into signing documents that he's not reading and kind of just a playing on the cynicism of it, but Gideon Saar is a very

serious politician that could potentially represent a new way forward. Similarly, Naftali Bennett, although he served under Netanyahu's government and briefly served as a defence minister, he's also clearly never been tested in the top job since leaving the government. And he was by the way, humiliated in the last government even by pledging his loyalty to Netanyahu was actually kept out of the governing coalition and sat in the opposition last time around. In the meantime whilst being in the opposition, he's literally written the book on combating coronavirus and everything that he would do differently from Netanyahu. So whilst these are known entities, the potential that the Prime Minister Netanyahu reign would come to an end and be replaced by either one of these three personalities does I think give it a fresh outlook.

- And I saw a couple of interesting articles about where are the women in this election. You know, there's an awful lot of men around the table. We had some up and coming women be it Staf Shafir in the Labour Party, but you know, it's a lot of that has died away. We also had, you know, Benny Gantz who was a popular as one goes chief of staff of the IDF, you know. When he came to London, when I worked for the Israeli embassy, he was, you know, really actually it was like being in the presence of a statesman, but yet he couldn't stand up to Netanyahu and couldn't seemingly out-maneuver him. Do you think that there are people who are watching who, you know, we would hope would step in as potential candidates for Israeli prime minister, looking at this and saying, you know, actually it's not about your ability to do the job or your credibility, but actually about how you can outmanoeuvre, you know, Netanyahu or the Israeli politics, you know, is the system letting down Israel in terms of its potential future leaders?

- Ah, there's a lot of questions there. Let me try and break it up and answer each one separately. In terms of the role of kind of senior women, it's interesting that although Merav Michaeli is the only party is the only female party leader, all of the parties, all of the mainstream parties except for the Likud, all have women as number two. And in Yesh Atid has , which is, she was by the way, herself a former general in the IDF, which is significant, the first ever female major, major general as Lapid's number two now. I mentioned that Gideon Saar who's former chairman of the Knesset Corona committee, Bennett has his long-term ally, Ayalah Shakkid, who as said would be in his ideal plan would be Israel's candidate to be his candidate to be justice minister. So there are senior women in there and I think even if you look at the Likud and all of the mainstream parties, they've all made an effort in the top 10 of their lists to have at least four women. And so we're not yet a parity, but we are going in that direction.

I obviously think that's an encouraging move. In terms of kind of where it goes for the IDF. You know, I've heard Yair Lapid joke that as a result of Benny Gantz breaking his electoral promise and entering the government, he's ruined the branding for future former generals. I don't think that's the case. I think people were expecting back in December when the election was called that another very popular former IDF Chief of Staff, Gadi Eisencott would enter the race. He's decided to sit this one out, but certainly could join in the future. And on the, we dunno what party he'd join by the way, but it's, he's been already been flirting with all of the major parties that we've discussed from Likud to the opposition parties. So any of those would be potentially be an option for him. And I think the outgoing, the current Mosad chief Yossi Cohen, who finishes his

term in the summer, has also been anticipated to eventually join politics. He may be aware that before they can join politics now they need to do a cooling off period for two or three years.

So it's not imminent. But certainly he's, in rare interviews that he has given, he has not denied the fact that he would look to go into politics as a next stage in his career. And the current chief of staff as well, although he's still currently serving Aviv Kohavi, is also particularly thought to be interested in the political career eventually. So although I'd said we have, it's the, this is the election of the journalists, we may get the major generals coming back in a future round.

- So one of the people we haven't touched upon who you know, was very popular when he was mayor of Jerusalem and then, you know, said he was thrown his hat into mainstream politics, this Nir Barkat. What do you see as his potential in the future?

- So Nir Barkat was an unfortunate victim of Netanyahu's, let's call it freestyle campaigning, but when it suited him last time around, he announced him as his candidate to be finance minister. This was six weeks before the election. And the understanding is that A, Nir Barkat is personally, probably the wealthiest Israeli politician. So you fancy to get some investment back for the Likud campaign directly from Nir Barkat. But also presumably that with his economic credentials, he would be a popular finance minister. However, as I said, you cannot, don't trust politicians, certainly not with the run up to the elections. Their promises are almost meaningless. And so straight afterwards he was bitterly disappointed when Israel Katz was chosen as finance minister and in fact, he missed out on a cabinet portfolio altogether. So he's there in the Likud, he's still kind of relatively senior within the Likud list.

There is a long list of Likud MKs or ministers that are perhaps junior ministers at the moment that are all looking to get an upgrade. And inevitably because it will be a coalition government, they're going to be disappointed. Again, the nature of coalition politics here is that you need to give the plum jobs, the most senior positions to your rivals as your coalition partners in order to keep them in the government and therefore the Likud, even very capable senior Likud MKs, are often the people to lose out. At least that's been the practise so far when Netanyahu has formed a government.

- So as we come to wrap up, we've obviously touched a huge number of topics, but what else do you want to leave our audience with for the final conclusion on what's next on the next few weeks of the Israeli election soap opera?

- So perhaps we can show the second slide just for a moment. 'Cause I think this one is useful and indicative of where the parties are. And if you see here that I've, that on the left right axis is kind of the traditional way in which we define Israeli politics along the peace/security axis. But the second axis, which is running up and up, up and down is the level of support for Netanyahu. And that's the key issue here. But will those parties, fragmented as they are, and ideologically diverse as they are, have enough in common and to find in a way in agreement if the numbers add up, obviously to be able to put aside their ideological differences and make a functioning,

coherent government of all their parts? Or will it be that squeeze at the end for Likud that will get them over the line with the help of the other small right wing parties and the religious parties that will then continue to get them through and to see exactly the Netanyahu agenda that he is, he's hoping and praying on. And I think we are two weeks out to the election. It's, too close to call right now.

- Thank you. So on that note, I'm going to hand back over to Wendy and I look forward to watching this space.

- Thank you very much Richard. And thanks Carly. Thank you for helping us sort through the many issues on the table around the Israeli election. Over the next few weeks, we will see many of the dynamics you touched on play out, and then the fun will begin. As we look to see the coalition negotiations take place. We all hope for the population's sake that there won't be a fifth election, but as you know, as we all know, we can never rule that out in Israel. So something to look forward to. Thank you to all our participants for joining us. Thank you to Carly and to Richard. Enjoy the rest of your day or your evening. Bye-bye. Thanks Richard.

- [Richard] Thank you very much.