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## Transcript

# Israel Post-Elections: An Uncertain Future

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### **Sophie Long:**

Good evening ladies and gentlemen. My name is Sophie Long and I am a journalist and presenter for BBC News. It's my great pleasure to welcome you here to Chatham House on this miserable Monday evening – well done for braving the weather. Now as usual, it has taken what some may consider to be an eternity, but finally they did it – 1.2 billion Catholics may be able to settle on their leader in less than 72 hours, but it took Israel, a country of around 6 million voters, more than seven weeks to sort out their leadership. But then forming a government in Israel has never been an easy task, and given my experience of BBC production meetings, I'm going to say that introducing a television presenter to the proceedings probably didn't make things any simpler. Still, the political deck in Israel has been reshuffled, and whether it was a slap in the face for Benjamin Netanyahu or a slap on the wrist, he has responded by waving goodbye to the ultra-orthodox parties and saying hello to Yesh Atid. There is indeed a future, but it is a very uncertain one.

Here this evening to explore what all this might mean in practice is Dr Toby Greene, who is director of research at BICOM. He's also written online for the *Guardian* and *New Statesman*, among other publications. We also have with us Yossi Mekelberg, who many of you will know is an associate fellow in the Middle East Programme here at Chatham House, but he's also programme director of international relations and social sciences at Webster University, Regents College and is also on the London Committee of Human Rights Watch. Lastly this evening we'll be hearing from the award-winning journalist, author and broadcaster Jonathan Freedland, who's written on the subject for too many publications to mention, and is also presenter of the BBC Radio 4's *The Long View*.

Now the aim of the game this evening is to hear from our very knowledgeable panellists but also to hear as much from you, the audience, as possible...

So without further ado, I will hand over the lectern to Dr Toby Greene.

### **Toby Greene:**

Well thank you Sophie, and thank you to Chatham House for inviting me to speak on this panel. It's a real honour to address such a prestigious audience.

Since I'm based in Israel I want to spend a few minutes trying to convey a flavour of what the impact of this election and this new government means for

Israel internally, before moving on to highlight some of the foreign policy implications. The headline here is that this election has really brought about a dramatic change in internal Israeli politics in a way that may not be obvious on the surface. It may not look like a dramatic change at first glance because the key decision-maker, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, remains the same. But beneath the top level, Netanyahu is working with a dramatically different set of forces. Israel's political party system has the remarkable capacity of completely reinventing itself almost overnight, and that is what happened in this election.

So what are the kinds of changes I'm talking about? Well first of all, we have a completely transformed Knesset: 53 of the 120 members of the last Knesset were replaced; 47 of the new entrants are brand new and have never served before in the Knesset; 26 members are women, which is a record for the Knesset, including the first Ethiopian-born woman MK, and three of the 12 party leaders are women. We have a ruling party, or ruling partnership, which is considerably weakened, as Sophie mentioned. Avigdor Lieberman is personally weakened because he is now on trial and his role as foreign minister has been put on ice for him until that trial is concluded. He merged his Yisrael Beiteinu faction with Likud for the elections, and the two parties combined went from 42 seats to 31 seats. They lost some of their support to the right and Naftali Bennett's Jewish Home party, but they lost more to the left, to Yair Lapid's centrist party.

We also have a new-look coalition and new ministers. Firstly we have a coalition without the ultra-orthodox, which is the big power change to have come out of this election, and nine of the 22 cabinet members have never served in ministerial office before. In Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid, not a single member has ever served in the Knesset before, of the 19 of them, and it now controls the treasury and the key domestic portfolios of health, education and welfare. Now you might think that this is a little bit scary, putting a bunch of people with little or no experience of national government in control of all these ministries. And in the case of Yair Lapid, with no political and economic experience – and with all due respect to television news presenters – it is a little bit scary. But inherently for many people in Israel I think it actually feels quite refreshing.

So how and why did all this happen? And with this I'm going to start referring a little more to the question of foreign policy. Well first of all we have to go back to the social protest movement that swept Israel in 2011. This was the root of the change. The basic story of the social protest movement was that Israel's secular, centrist middle class was mobilized onto the streets in

protests for the first time around domestic socio-economic issues and not around foreign policy issues or the peace process. In the past, masses came onto the streets in Israel to support the peace process or to oppose the peace process, but in the last few years there has been in effect almost no peace process to speak of, so there has been nothing to mobilize for or against and the middle class fell politically quiet.

The most immediate effect was to decimate the Kadima party, which under the leadership of Tzipi Livni was primarily about the peace process, and was suddenly rendered politically irrelevant. Tzipi Livni survives: she was dumped by the Kadima party but created a new party around herself, dedicated primarily to the peace process, and she's in the coalition with responsibility for the peace process with six seats. But politically she's a weakened figure. Kadima itself has largely been replaced by Yair Lapid's centrist party which is much more focused on the issues that brought people onto the streets in 2011: costs of living, reform of the political system, and of course the headline issue of ending the exemption from the military draft for ultra-orthodox Jews and trying to integrate them more into society and the workforce.

The social protest movement had other key effects – it made Labor raise its flag of social democracy more prominently than the peace process flag, and Shelly Yachimovich, the leader of the Labor Party, is staying out of the government, principally on economic grounds.

The next effect was to create a new and surprising political alliance between the national religious camp – which is pro-settlement and right wing on the peace process, represented by Naftali Bennett and the Jewish Home Party – with the secular centrist middle class – represented by Yair Lapid and Yesh Atid, which is pro-two state and believes in the peace process. And as a result, the National Religious [Party] broke from its former alliance with the ultra-orthodox, despite the fact that they seemed more naturally aligned on the issue of the peace process. So the Israeli centre stopped voting on the peace process and started voting on its socio-economic interests.

But also the National Religious, [now] Jewish Home, also downplayed foreign policy. People in the UK, in as far as they were talking about Naftali Bennett, were talking about his foreign policy and his opposition to two states. But that's not what Bennett was talking about in the election, or subsequently. He was talking – and is talking – about the same socio-economic issues as Yair Lapid and Yesh Atid. So now Bennett's anti-two state party has joined a government where Tzipi Livni, the leader in effect of the Israeli peace camp, has been given the job of negotiating with the Palestinians. According to the

old model of left and right in Israel, where left is for territorial compromise and the right is against it, this coalition makes no sense.

So at this point you might be thinking that the Israelis have completely lost it. The rest of the world looks at the Middle East and sees the peace process in tatters, the Palestinians turning their backs on the two-state solution, the region aflame, and here are the Israelis, barely even talking about it, suddenly looking inwards at domestic social issues.

So what explains that? Well paradoxically, first of all, I think it's because of the diplomatic and regional picture that foreign policy issues have slipped down the agenda. If there was a peace proposal on the table, then it would become a political debate in Israel, for it or against it. But there isn't. The widespread view in Israel is that the two-state solution is desirable, but there is no Palestinian partner.

Meanwhile, the political chaos in the region has made Israelis even more wary about territorial concessions, on the basis that you withdraw today and you don't know who will be on your borders tomorrow. At the same time, there was no serious alternative prime ministerial candidate to Netanyahu on these diplomatic security issues. It's not so much an issue of Netanyahu's views on the Palestinians or Iran, or on the regional threats, it's more a question of competence. He is still seen as the only really competent prime ministerial candidate to manage these issues.

So what does this government mean in terms of foreign policy? The truth is that it's very hard to say, because so many of the factors are new and have not been tested. Netanyahu himself remains a very difficult politician to read. If he was an absolute and uncompromising hardliner, we'd know where we stand. But he isn't, he's more ambiguous, and we don't know exactly how he will act diplomatically.

Few expected that his first coalition agreement would be a deal with Livni which gives her responsibility for the Palestinian file, but there she is in the government. We know where Naftali Bennett stands on settlements and the peace process, but we don't know, if and when Netanyahu makes some concessions or gestures to the Palestinians, how he will react. We know that Yair Lapid of Yesh Atid has said he will not stay in a coalition that is not advancing the peace process, but we don't know how determined he will be about that, given that his main promises to the voters were on domestic issues.

We do know that we have a more uncompromising figure on the Palestinian issue as minister of defence. Ehud Barak, the former minister of defence, who

had a productive working relationship with Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, is gone, and we now have Moshe 'Bogie' Ya'alon, who is much more hard-line in his views on the Palestinians. At the same time, Ya'alon seems less gung-ho about the military option on Iran – or the Israeli unilateral military option – something of which Ehud Barak was one of the principal cheerleaders.

Staying with the Iranian issue, there is a kind of popular political parlour game in Israel in which you have to predict how each member of the Israeli security cabinet would vote if asked to approve a military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities. And now that game just got a whole new lease of life because the cast of characters has completely changed and no one knows the views of the new people – probably most of those people don't really know what their views are, or if they were asked to decide how to vote.

So to sum up the headlines, firstly: a very new political cast of characters in Israel, and a new political orientation around domestic challenges. The old right versus left has never looked less relevant. Secondly, many of the key characters are untested and we don't know how they will act on key foreign policy issues, and this makes it hard to predict the foreign policy agenda of the government. Thirdly and finally, I would suggest that in the peace process, the prime minister remains in a pivotal position, and he continues to sit at the centre point of a coalition with a wide range of views on the peace process, with figures both to the right and to the left. So I think he still has that pivotal power to steer the government one way or another if he chooses to do so. He also has alternative coalition partners outside the government that could potentially replace his current partners if one or other of them decided to leave on some point of principle.

So with that I'll conclude and I'll look forward to addressing questions.

### **Yossi Mekelberg:**

Right, thank you very much. I will try not to repeat too many of these things, because the facts are known. Thank you very much for your introduction Sophie and good evening ladies and gentlemen. I think it takes some dedication to come on a rainy night to listen to anything about Israel and what happens in the region. It is always nice to speak in front of Chatham House audiences – it always feels a bit like a home game.

I must admit once again we've seen this decision, the Israeli political system timed to perfection, with the swearing in of the government in Israel to

coincide with a Chatham House event. And we're very grateful to the government that just a few hours ago it was sworn in. I wish sometimes that it also coincided or coordinated its policies with the same aptness as the timing – it doesn't seem to be that likely. It took the prime minister two months to form a coalition and we are given 10 minutes to make sense of it. I guess it will probably take somewhat longer to understand the dynamics which will emerge out of this government, and I'm almost envious of Toby because he made a lot of sense out of it and I must admit I will try to introduce a much more confused version of it. Maybe it will help me to unconfuse [*sic*] myself.

The problem with most Israeli elections is they produce figures, but they don't produce any conclusive results. The real outcome of the election is revealed when there is a government, and then you see actually the result, what is going to happen. Jonathan and I actually were together on a panel two months ago, and we looked at the result and started scratching our heads – what do we actually see? A lot of numbers were running there, so we knew that Yesh Atid did very well, but actually was there any result?

I think the elections of January were one of the most inconclusive in Israel's political history. Before the election we were told so many times that, you know, the Israeli public is going to the left – sorry, to the right – and then after the election they went back to the – all this kind of confusion. I started to be confused, because it's not right and it's not left because it's more to do with hawkishness and dovishness, and not with right and left. Because the government we see in front of us, economically speaking, is a very right-wing government, almost a Thatcherite-style government, if I'm allowed to mention it.

I think that what really happened, it's a very particular style of voting in Israel – a very confused bunch of people – and what we see is a very confusing election result and I think a very confusing government. Generally if you look at the Israeli public, it's a sophisticated public, very sophisticated public. But as voters, they are probably the least sophisticated. They don't vote as a sophisticated electorate because they are very particular. They want exactly what they want, so they look, go more towards what I see as an interest group, as a lobby, which becomes a party, more than a catch-all party. And as a result you get this kind of fragmentation which I think is also ingrained in Israel and the Jewish people, and it's brought from the diaspora.

So the result of this was that the last two months were characterized by what became known customly [*sic*] as the horse-trading negotiation coming to an end just in the last minute, when everyone in many ways knew what the result

would be and what kind of government is going to emerge. And what we see is the 33rd government in Israel – which gives you a clue that almost every two years there is a new government. The last one was one of the longest serving, almost four years. So let's see if the longevity of this one will be anything similar – I doubt it.

There are 25 parties and 68 members of parliament, but the question is: can they conceal the differences among themselves? This is in many ways the coalition of the willing, and for many, the will is to stay in power, or to be in power... to have a coherent level of policies. I think one of the reasons for that is the miscalculation by Netanyahu in running as part of the Likud Yisrael Beiteinu party, which... he got advice this would do so well – 'if we had together 42 [seats] before the election, we'll probably gain more seats' – and actually losing one quarter of the vote. It left them with one quarter of the seats in the Knesset, which means the day after the election you start really scratching your head: how do I form a government?

With one of the paradoxes in Israeli politics, you basically don't do very well in the election, but Netanyahu was the only one that still could form a coalition. As a result, on the one hand losing a lot of power and seats in the Knesset, the other in the best position to form a coalition. But what he got as a result is the coalition that he didn't want. He was very much used to a coalition with the ultra-orthodox, where we pay what we pay in terms of domestic politics money, but they don't intervene too much in foreign affairs, and that's what we get.

All of a sudden, the building of the coalition became very different with the two news stars of Yesh Atid, Lapid, and Jewish Home led by Naftali Bennett, with their 19 and 12 seats respectively. Both show the new style of leadership: they ooze of charisma – if you like this kind of populist charisma – they are relatively young, they're inexperienced as leaders – so they give some sense of freshness as you mentioned Toby. But the question: can they actually deliver?

What they learned very quickly is how to deal with this murky business of forming governments in Israel, recognizing very quickly that their best negotiation strategy was to present Netanyahu with no option than to have both of them or none of them. Netanyahu tried hard to break this alliance, making promises, leaking to the press and everyone else that there is an alternative, but everyone knew there was no real alternative. Failing to form a government would have led either to Netanyahu ending his political career, or new elections, which probably would result in the same thing.



The outcome is a coalition which looks from the outside as a coalition with a comfortable majority and potentially radical domestic agenda. However, this is a government which leaves little room for optimism regarding the peace process with the Palestinians. I think this issue was basically sacrificed for the sake of building a coalition, in making the compromises needed on the domestic issues, and I think this is really alarming considering that a third intifada might just loom in the offing.

Some will say, probably the secular will say that for the first time in many years there are no ultra-orthodox parties represented around the government table, the price that is usually paid for having such a coalition. I think the kind of agreement which might lead to the ultra-orthodox to serve, maybe, in the army, do some civil service and maybe even to include part of the Palestinian Arab minority in Israel in this agreement, might actually send some interesting changes in Israeli society – but every such compromise or such an achievement would be paid in foreign affairs, mainly with the peace process with the Palestinians. I think it also might be interesting to see when the constitutional change – though there is no official constitution – because the coalition agreement tried to tackle the fragmentation and constant stalemate by increasing the election threshold from two to four per cent, consequently decreasing the number of parties in the Knesset.

But if you give just a quick glance at the results of the last elections, [this] reveals that this might badly hurt mainly the Arab parties, unless they find a way to unite forces. This won't make coalition agreements in any way or shape easier because the Arab minority is never represented in the government.

If you wanted an insight into the way that Yair Lapid, this great liberal Tel Avivian, is thinking is when he says, 'I'm not going into any coalition with Zoabis.' Not specifically with [Haneen] Zoabi, but the Zoabis. I don't think anyone would like to hear... he was entitled not to have a coalition with Arab parties for any ideological or political reasons, but he couldn't say, 'We basically are not going to have any blocking bloc, we are not going into government with the Arab minorities.' This in 2013 is alarming, and this is supposed to be the more liberal side.

The most puzzling thing is the lack of debate about the peace with the Palestinians during the election and how little a role it's played in the coalition negotiations. Appointing Tzipi Livni to head the negotiations looks like a good idea because she supports the peace process in a way that might lead to something, but she's not the one that's going to make a decision around the

cabinet table. Anyway there's already an inner cabinet led by Netanyahu and they will make the decision. For the first time I hear there is going to be a foreign minister but also a minister for international relations. As someone that heads a programme of international relations, I really don't understand the difference between them – and with the promise to Naftali Bennett that any compromise or withdrawal from territories will have to get the approval of a referendum, which means going back to the incitement of the mid-1990s. I think in this sense we can say quite safely that the peace process looks to me not on ice, but quite dead, unless something else happens.

And that something that might happen is Obama's visit to Jerusalem tomorrow. Can he make any change? Are we going back to June 2009 and another big speech is coming our way, and we all crown Obama as the next big champion of peace just to be disappointed in a few years? I think this is almost the last opportunity. The main problem is other partners – it's not only whether only a Palestinian partner, it's whether there is an Israeli partner for the peace process.

I think on the two other issues that Obama will have to deal with, one is Iran, and Obama made the promise that he won't let Iran develop a nuclear programme. But the question is what does it mean? A military operation, sanctions, oil embargoes, blockades... how to tell? But maybe it's actually a message to Israel: we'll deal with it, you shouldn't deal there. But they deal with a very new government.

The other thing is what to do with Syria, the Arab Spring and the expansion of fundamentalism. The one thing probably that he won't find in Israel is a government that is capable of making process, and what is important to Obama is the process.

My last conclusion is that I look at this government, and I think in their rush to form a government they glossed over some big conceptual differences on many issues – and also don't forget, there are a lot of personal ambitions and egos that were hurt in the last week or so. They are waiting for Netanyahu, and hence I'm not so sure that this government will survive long enough.

### **Jonathan Freedland:**

Thanks very much. The pleasure of speaking third is that you get to simply repeat what the people before you have said. Forgive me if I do that a bit; there might be a bit of overlap.

Very much agree with some of the points made by the two previous speakers. The starting point – I've been asked to speak about how the rest of the region and the world will react, rather than internally, to the formation of this new government.

The first point I suppose is that foreign ministers around the world are contemplating this new government rather in the spirit of Donald Rumsfeld and his 'known unknowns'. This is a cabinet and a government full of 'known unknowns' and they will all be doing their best to mark up on the people involved for one thing. The Yesh Atid party has been mentioned a couple of times. I spoke to a journalist last week who said it's not so much a party as a fashion show, led by a TV presenter, but with its list consisting of two rabbis, one singer, a former judo champion and a former head of the Shin Bet intelligence agency. It's very hard for them to read where this party will fall. There's a knowledge gap just to start with, and that's going to be the story I think of the next few weeks or months as they try to fill that in.

I think it's fair to say that the rest of the world's interest is chiefly what the government will do in the area of international affairs and foreign politics: largely the Israel–Palestine conflict, which for those observing this remains the central story, but also on Iran. The first observation about this – and it's been made by... Toby I think made a strong point about it – is that this was a government elected for largely domestic reasons. Whatever was in the reporting about Naftali Bennett and others, the parties who did well were elected on a domestic agenda and for domestic reasons.

And indeed that is being reflected in the formation of this coalition. And I'm told that more detail will come to light, but what I read today was that there is indeed no mention of the peace process in the formal official guidelines for the coalition. Normally there is some language in there that binds the parties. I think there have been a few formations bilaterally, but in the overall coalition guidelines I think there's no mention of that.

I think some people will read that – that focus on the domestic over the international, foreign or any other conflict – as perhaps a sign that this government will be less hawkish if it's looking inward and concerned with matters of the economy, conscription etc. It will be less concerned with those issues which touch on Israel's neighbours.

I think that will be fed by – and it's been talked about – that view will be fed by this appointment of Tzipi Livni, in relative terms a more dovish figure in the coalition, be it one of the few parties not to run on a domestic agenda but to run specifically on reviving the peace process. The fact that she's been

appointed to lead on negotiations with the Palestinians, people will think well that's good, that's a sign of less hawkishness, certainly than the outgoing government. Her job, it seems to me, will be to be in a way a refreshed version of what Ehud Barak was doing in the first year or two, to serve as the acceptable or public face of this government, to go around the world shaking hands and making nice in the world's capitals.

My view of that is – there are two points I would make about that – the first one is: I don't think it will last, because pretty soon people are going to look at the arithmetic of this coalition, and work out that with just six seats, whatever she says when she visits Brussels or Washington or Vienna or Rome isn't going to cut that much ice, because she's just outweighed and outvoted so heavily by the rest of the members of the coalition. Indeed, it seems to me that it's so transparent that she's there as a fig leaf. The thing about fig leaves is, as you all know, they don't work if they're transparent – forgive me for planting a semi-pornographic image in your mind! A fig leaf that we can all see through as clearly as this one isn't going to do the job and I think therefore that the Livni 'trick' will not work for very long. I think people will see it as well in her own motivations that she was someone who realized she had to go into this coalition or be finished, more or less, politically.

The second point I would make about this – it's been referred to, and I wouldn't dwell on it to any audience except Chatham House, because I think the people in this room will be interested in this – this breakup in effect, or dispersal of the responsibilities of the foreign ministry, is a significant development. It isn't just that you now have Yuval Steinitz as the head of the department of international affairs and strategy, but you also have a deputy foreign minister, [Ze'ev] Elkin, there is a foreign minister job vacated by Avigdor Lieberman, but it's going to be held in the prime minister's office. You have Silvan Shalom, who has a job for regional cooperation. You have – Naftali Bennett I think has the Jewish diaspora portfolio, and Tzipi Livni for the Palestinians. So in other words, the job of the foreign ministry has been broken up, by my count, to at least six different people, and six different departments are going to be doing that job. That has an effect I think on the prestige of the foreign ministry itself and its diplomats around the world, and will make it a less able and capable institution. And I think that will have a bearing.

I will put all those points together in this point I began with about domestic affairs. I think that feeds this notion that there was this hope that a more domestic focus might mean: well at least at the very least things won't get worse, it'll be a maintenance of the status quo. I'm of the view that while in

some places status quo might imply things hold steady, in the Israel–Palestine, conflict there is no such thing as the status quo. The status quo is never static: things move, and they particularly move in the most obvious way in the creation of so-called ‘facts on the ground’ – increasing settlement.

On that point, I would say that the key thing to notice is the colour, the complexion of this new coalition. The key portfolios that affect settlement are all in the hands of parties who are either directly settler parties, or who at the very least have the ear of, or show their ear to, the settlers. The key ministries – housing, defence and the interior – are in the hands of people who fit that description.

So you have someone like Uri Ariel – so committed to the settlements he's named after one – but Danny Danon and the defence minister Moshe Ya'alon, hawkish figures who are going to enable and facilitate expanded settlement. Even if that isn't shouted about and declared in a way it was towards the end of the outgoing government with the E1 announcement, etc., that would be in keeping actually with the whole settler story over the last 40-plus years which has been a story of the below-the-radar development, and I think that could well continue.

As the analyst who's been here before, Daniel Levy, says, that the strategy is to build from the hilltops not just shout from the rooftops, and I think there's every indication that will continue and be facilitated by people in the ‘commanding heights’, if you like – those positions that really most affect that. I think you can look at the cabinet table, and around the table are either people who if they *are* engaged on this issue – the Israel–Palestine issue and settlements – are hawkish, or if they're not engaged on this issue then they are, as that suggests, indifferent. And I think you've just got to just take Yair Lapid in a way at face value and consider that since he had had next to no demands, or only the most superficial of demands for rebalancing the peace process, that he is not going to go to the wall on that issue; his demands are more domestic.

The other thing that people care about is obviously Iran. There's a report – I think it's been referred to in the *Haaretz* today – that suggests that the new decision makers on this are either unknown quantities, or anyway more hawkish on the notion of a unilateral Israeli action on Iran. I don't know whether that's right or not because of this point about unknowns, but what we do know is that two or three of those more seasoned voices around the cabinet table have gone. Ehud Barak played a very interesting shifting role on the Iran question, which we can perhaps talk about in questions – but the

absence of Dan Meridor and Benny Begin... these were people who had experience and a reading of their own on the Iran question, and therefore the ability to challenge the prime minister, who as we know is very committed on Iran. And those figures will no longer be there.

So the last couple of things I would just say – because I've been asked to talk about non-regional actors, their reaction – the United States declaring itself, very early in a way, with a visit this very week. I think it's crucial to notice this is a visit and not a reward: it's come too early. People I've spoken to say that's almost deliberate, that the visit was timed now, because if it came later on it could look like an endorsement of whatever's going on, or was anyway more likely to get into some kind of spat about for example new settlement announcements. This way, by going now, it comes right in the immediate honeymoon period and doesn't look as if it's a judgment in any way.

I think it's true what people have said, that no one's expecting a big initiative, but I think it's significant if President Obama uses the opportunity to at least do what a lot of people were agitating he do in the first term, and that is to develop a relationship with the Israeli electorate, not necessarily the Israeli government. You need to go over the heads of the Israeli government and to speak to the Israeli people, get some goodwill in the bank, and people say if he then has an initiative in the next year or two, at least he can draw on that goodwill he's built up.

But I think Americans are going to be asking questions, they're going to be looking at Lapid and Livni wondering: do they have the clout to restrain the rest of the coalition if they go in a direction that is not positive? My fear is that the answer to that is no, but they'll look at that. I think the figure of Moshe Ya'alon is very significant, because the defence relationship with the United States is the closest relationship and there is lots of mileage there for them to get to know him: technology cooperation, military joint exercises, etc. They will see there: is this someone who is amenable? And they will work on that. And then how diminished a figure is Netanyahu himself, and how weakened is he? Those are all judgments I think Americans are going to be looking for.

Very last point on Europe: all of the above, but with less patience. I think there'll be much less patience for PR Livni travels, and for a more hawkish government. The fuse is shorter in Europe than it is in Washington for reasons we could go into. And lastly, they don't have the same Iran/Israel–Palestine trade-off that operates in the United States. In other words, Obama's been happy in a way to say, 'do what you like; we'll give you a freer hand on Israel–Palestine' – I abbreviate – but 'in order just to get off my back

on Iran', and to ease the pressure on the Iran issue. And I don't think that plays the same way in Europe. So that's just a quick survey of how I think the rest of the world is looking on that.