

## Political

**update:**– Benjamin Netanyahu is sworn in as Israel’s new prime minister – 2 April

### Key points:

- Benjamin Netanyahu’s government is sworn in by Israel’s parliament
  - Netanyahu says his predominately right-wing coalition will seek peace with the Palestinians and tackle Iran’s illegal nuclear programme
  - New Israeli foreign minister backs away from the Annapolis peace process; Kadima party protests and US administration reiterates its commitment to a two state solution
  - Netanyahu’s government with 30 ministers is the largest in Israeli history
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### Latest developments

- Israel’s 32<sup>nd</sup> government, under the premiership of Likud party-leader Benjamin Netanyahu, was sworn in by a 69 to 45 Knesset vote on Tuesday (31 March). The policy guidelines of the new government, published on Thursday (2 April), state that it will:

“strive to achieve security and social justice, improve the economy, advance peace with all of Israel’s neighbors, and maintain the Jewish character of the country while ensuring the rights of all religions.” (02/04/09)

- The coalition government has the support of 64 Members of the Knesset in the 120 seat parliament, including: the Likud party’s 27 MKs, the Yisrael Beiteinu party’s 15 MKs, the Shas party’s 11 MKs, the Jewish Home party’s three MKs and eight of the Labor party’s 13 MKs. The remaining five Labor MKs, who opposed joining the coalition, plan to abstain in Knesset votes.
- In his prime ministerial inauguration speech to the Knesset, Netanyahu laid out what his government plans to achieve. Despite failing to offer his explicit support for a two state solution, the prime minister gave significant emphasis to achieving peace with the Palestinians. He declared that:

“We do not wish to rule another people... We do not want to rule the Palestinians... I say to the Palestinian leadership that if you really want peace, we can achieve peace.” (31/03/09)

- Netanyahu also focused his attentions on Iran’s illegal nuclear programme and, in his view, the lack of international action to halt it. In a reference to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s calls for Israel to be “wiped off the map,” he said:

“The Jewish people has learned its lesson; it cannot take lightly megalomaniac leaders who threaten to destroy it, and in contrast with the terrible trauma we experienced last century when we were helpless and stateless, today we are not defenceless... I will not let

anyone undermine our right to exist... The Iranian leader's plan to erase Israel falls on deaf ears around the world." (31/03/09)

- The speech, which also gave strong emphasis to tackling the economic crisis, was subjected to numerous protests from the Knesset floor. Labor's Shelly Yacimovich MK, who opposed her party's decision to join the coalition, accused Netanyahu of planning to cut the education budget.
- In his first speech as foreign minister, Yisrael Beiteinu leader Avigdor Lieberman caused domestic and international concern on Wednesday (1 April) by declaring "a change in Israel's policy regarding the peace process." He said that Israel was no longer bound by November 2007's Annapolis agreement: to pursue bilateral negotiations with the Palestinian Authority to achieve a two state solution.
- The new foreign minister said that unlike 2003's Road Map, which Israel is bound to and which also seeks to achieve a two state solution, "the Israeli government never ratified Annapolis, nor did [the] Knesset."
- Kadima party leader and out-going foreign minister Tzipi Livni called, on Thursday (2 April), for Netanyahu to disavow Lieberman's comments, saying that they "hurt Israel," which is no longer "a partner" for peace.
- In response to Lieberman's speech, US state department spokesman Gordon Duguid reiterated the US' commitment to a two state solution, saying:

"We will work closely with Prime Minister Netanyahu's government to advance the cause of peace and stability in the Middle East, and move the parties in the direction of a two-state solution." (01/04/09)

- Following a meeting of EU diplomats in the Czech Republic on Friday (27 March), the host and Czech foreign minister Karel Schwarzenberg said that a summit between the Israeli prime minister and EU leaders planned for late May or early June had been cancelled. He added:

"There won't be any progress in relations between Israel and the European Union until the Israeli government clarifies its stance on the creation of a Palestinian state." (02/04/09)

- Netanyahu's government is the largest in Israeli history, containing 30 ministers and seven deputy ministers. Despite this, there is no separate minister of health, with Netanyahu planning to cover this area from the prime minister's office. Senior health ministry officials warned on Wednesday (1 April) that not having a dedicated senior minister will damage both the quality and availability of the country's healthcare services.

## **Background**

- Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party won 27 Knesset seats in the Israeli general election on 10 February. The centrist Kadima party won 28 seats but was deemed by Israeli President Shimon Peres of having a poor chance of forming a coalition due to the small size of the Knesset's centre-left bloc, as compared to the right-wing bloc.
- President Peres assigned Netanyahu, on 20 February, with the task of forming the next government by 22 March. On 20 March the Israeli President extended the deadline to 3 April as Netanyahu was still pursuing negotiations.

- During his negotiations Netanyahu courted both the large right-wing Knesset bloc, as well as the Labor and Kadima parties, with the hope of establishing a broad national unity government. However, Kadima refused to join Netanyahu's coalition, with its chairwoman, Tzipi Livni, insisting that he comes out openly in favour of a two state solution, which he failed to do. Livni also wanted a rotating premiership with Netanyahu, which the Likud leader refused.
- Netanyahu signed coalition agreements with Yisrael Beiteinu on 15 March, Shas on 23 March, Labor on 24 March and Jewish Home on 25 March. Under the agreements: Labor received five ministerial portfolios, with its chairman Ehud Barak remaining defense minister; Shas chairman Eli Yishai remains deputy prime minister and has also become minister of the interior, while fellow party member, Ariel Atias has become housing and construction minister; Jewish Home has been given the science portfolio; and Yisrael Beiteinu controls the foreign, tourism, national infrastructure, immigrant absorption and public security ministries.
- Benjamin Netanyahu has been the chairman of the Likud party since December 2006. From 2002 to 2003 he served as foreign minister and from 2003 to 2005 finance minister, both in Ariel Sharon's government.
- As prime minister from 1996-1999, following an agreement with the then Palestinian president Yasser Arafat, Netanyahu instigated the successful withdrawal of Israeli troops and settlers from the West Bank city of Hebron in January 1997. In 1998, he also signed the Wye River Accords with Yasser Arafat. The agreement aimed to transfer further West Bank land from Israeli to Palestinian Authority control, but collapsed with the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada in September 2000.