In the run-up to the Israeli parliamentary elections on October 27, FokusIsrael.ch is profiling the Jewish state's most prominent political leaders. This week: Naftali Bennett of the "Beyachad" alliance, who previously ousted current Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu from power in 2021.

By Jan Kapusnak

Naftali Bennett can claim something none of Benjamin Netanyahu's other current rivals can: He has already ousted him from power once. In 2021, Bennett turned his Yamina party's mere seven Knesset seats into the office of prime minister when he formed an extraordinary eight-party coalition that spanned from the nationalist right to the Zionist left. The alliance also included Ra'am, making it the first time in Israel's history that an Arab party became a formal coalition partner. The "Government of Change" ended Netanyahu's twelve-year reign but collapsed within a year, paving the way for his return in 2022.

Five years later, Bennett is once again attempting to unseat Netanyahu. His new "Bennett 2026" party has joined forces with Yair Lapid's "Yesh Atid" to run in the election as "Beyachad" ("Together") in the election, with Bennett leading the alliance. Once proud to describe himself as further to the right than Netanyahu, Bennett now presents himself as "a man of the right, a man of the State of Israel, a liberal," an experienced former prime minister, and a competent alternative to a government he accuses of having failed its country both before and after October 7. Bennett mocked Netanyahu's attempts to evade responsibility for the massacre, calling him "the Israeli Forrest Gump"—a weak, pathetic, helpless "nebbich" (fool) who is swept up in events by chance.

From Startup Entrepreneur to Politician

Bennett was born in Haifa in 1972 to American-Jewish parents who had immigrated from San Francisco. His family became increasingly religious during his childhood, and Bennett identifies as a Modern Orthodox Jew. He served as an officer in the elite units Sayeret Matkal and Maglan and led several operations in southern Lebanon. Bennett was also successful outside the military. In 1999, he co-founded the online security company Cyota, which was sold to RSA Security in 2005 for $145 million.

Bennett brought a startup mentality to politics: set a goal, build a team, and then deliver. His admirers see him as competent and energetic, while his critics accuse

him of overconfidence and a tendency to treat political conflicts as management problems. Bennett's path into politics led through Netanyahu. From 2006 to 2008, Bennett served as Netanyahu's chief of staff while Netanyahu led the opposition. His departure—attributed by Israeli media to tensions with Netanyahu's wife, Sara—marked the beginning of a relationship with Netanyahu characterized by strained cooperation and bitter rivalry.

Elected to the Knesset as a Religious Zionist

Bennett subsequently headed the Yesha Council, the most important organization of Jewish communities in Judea and Samaria. In 2012, he took control of the "Jewish Home" party and leveraged his religious identity, military record, and high-tech achievements to broaden the appeal of the religious-Zionist party beyond its traditional base. In the 2013 election, "Jewish Home" won twelve seats and brought Bennett into the Knesset for the first time.

During the 2013 coalition negotiations, Bennett's most important ally was Yair Lapid. Although they led ideologically different parties, the two agreed that neither would join Netanyahu's government without the other. Their combined 31 seats ultimately forced Netanyahu to include both men and leave the ultra-Orthodox parties in the opposition. The tactical partnership between Bennett and Lapid—dubbed the "Brothers' Alliance"—heralded their later, more significant collaboration in 2021, when Bennett became prime minister and Lapid became deputy prime minister, as well as the formation of their current joint list for the October 27 elections.

Ministers in various Netanyahu administrations

Between 2013 and 2020, Bennett held several ministerial posts in Netanyahu's governments. At the Ministry of Economy, he championed free markets, deregulation, and Israel's high-tech sector. He also pursued modest reforms as Minister of Religious Affairs, without challenging Orthodox control over religious life. From 2015 to 2019, he oversaw education and diaspora affairs, expanded advanced mathematics programs, strengthened Jewish and Zionist content in schools, and managed relations with Jewish communities abroad.

During his tenure as defense minister from 2019 to 2020, Bennett called for

increased pressure on Hamas and Iran. This reflected the “Octopus Doctrine,” which he had advocated since at least 2018. According to this doctrine, Israel should not only attack Iran’s regional proxies, such as Hezbollah, but also the mullah regime in Tehran itself.

In reality, however, nothing fundamentally changed during Bennett’s brief tenure regarding Israel’s policy of deterring and containing Hamas while maintaining control over Gaza—a strategy whose underlying assumptions collapsed catastrophically on October 7.

In Favor of a Market Economy—Against a Palestinian State

The “Jewish Home” party, led by Bennett, combined religious Zionism and social conservatism with a free-market economy and an active security policy. Bennett rejected Palestinian statehood, arguing that a sovereign state in the geographical heart of Israel would pose an intolerable security risk. His alternative was to annex Area C of Judea and Samaria, where the settlements are located, while granting the Palestinians limited self-rule in Areas A and B.

Bennett was also a fierce critic of judicial activism and accused the Supreme Court and military legal advisors of unnecessarily restricting the IDF. In 2018, he claimed that Israeli soldiers feared the Attorney General—the army’s highest legal authority—more than they feared Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar. The then-IDF chief Gadi Eisenkot, who, like Bennett, is now among Netanyahu’s challengers, rejected this claim and said that military legal advisors had never prevented him from carrying out a necessary operation.

After four elections in two years, during which Israel plunged into an unprecedented political crisis, Bennett and Yair Lapid formed an exceptionally diverse coalition in June 2021, thereby ending Netanyahu’s twelve-year rule. They brought together eight parties, ranging from Bennett’s nationalist “Yamina” party to the left-leaning Meretz, and included the Arab party “Ra’am.” Although “Yamina” held only seven seats in the Knesset, Bennett became prime minister, with Lapid serving as deputy prime minister and set to replace him halfway through the term.

From Right-Wing Dogmatist to Pragmatist as Minister-President

The prime minister's term in office marked Bennett's transformation from an uncompromising religious Zionist to a more pragmatic national leader. This was most evident in his partnership with "Ra'am," an Islamist and socially conservative Arab party that had been founded just a few weeks after the 2021 Gaza conflict and the severe Jewish-Arab violence in Israel. Bennett apologized for having previously accused "Ra'am" leader Mansour Abbas of supporting terrorism and promised to "turn the page" on Jewish-Arab relations. He remained on the right on security issues, but he crossed his former political boundaries.

Netanyahu therefore labeled Bennett a fraud who led a left-wing government that relied on "supporters of terrorism." Netanyahu's supporters even denounced Bennett as a traitor. Bennett and his allies faced demonstrations and personal threats, prompting the Shin Bet, Israel's domestic intelligence agency, to warn that the growing incitement could lead to political violence. The fact was that Bennett had broken his campaign promise not to join a government that would make Lapid prime minister or rely on Ra'am.

Under mounting pressure from the opposition, there were defections and uprisings within Bennett's party. As a result, the coalition ultimately lost its one-seat majority in the 120-member Knesset, paralyzing the government. In June 2022, the Knesset dissolved itself, Bennett left politics, and the subsequent election brought Netanyahu back to power.

Return to Politics After the Massacre of October 7

The massacre on October 7 marked Bennett's return to public life. Although he held no official office, he reported for duty at a reserve headquarters, visited devastated communities, and became a prominent international advocate for Israel. His fluent English and combative interviews went some way toward filling the vacuum in the government's public diplomacy. However, he also criticized the conduct of the war in Gaza and advocated encirclement, security zones, and repeated raids during the immediate occupation of densely populated areas.

Bennett also accepted some responsibility for the disaster on October 7. "Of course,

I, too, bear responsibility," he said, noting that he had served as prime minister for twelve months and had left measures unfinished that could have changed the situation. In principle, however, he believes that Prime Minister Netanyahu bears the primary political responsibility for October 7, because it was mostly he who governed Israel over the preceding fourteen years.

Abolition of the "ultra-Orthodox state within a state"

In April 2025, Bennett founded a new political party, Bennett 2026, and a year later joined Lapid's Yesh Atid to form the "Beyachad" (Together) alliance, which he leads as the prime ministerial candidate. The party's name reflects the ongoing Americanization of Israeli politics, which is increasingly focused on individual leaders. In his campaign, Bennett promises an "Israeli Renaissance" to heal the country, rebuild its institutions, and replace Netanyahu's politics of personal interests and perpetual crisis with responsible governance.

His platform calls for an independent government commission of inquiry, universal military or civilian service, a lower cost of living, consensual judicial reform, and one million new immigrants within a decade. He wants to dismantle the "ultra-Orthodox state within a state" in order to create "a Jewish, democratic, prosperous, and strong state."

No More Alliance with Arab Parties

Now that "Ra'am" was brought into the government in 2021, "Beyachad" is ruling out a government that includes Arab parties—a pledge that could reassure right-wing voters but makes it harder to secure a majority. This is especially true given that Bennett faces competition from the up-and-coming "Yashar" party led by former IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot, which is attracting centrist and security-minded voters. The latest poll by the TV station "Channel 12," published on August 10, predicts that "Beyachad" will win only 15 seats in the October 27 election, while "Yashar" will secure 24 seats.

But Israeli elections are decided by coalition-building, and Bennett has already shown that even a small but decisive party can determine who becomes prime

minister. His greatest weakness and his strongest argument are therefore one and the same: his 2021 government. He must convince Israelis that what Netanyahu calls his betrayal is proof that he can govern a divided country.

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Jan Kapusnak is a political analyst and author. He lives in Tel Aviv.