



Yair Lapid: From TV Star to Netanyahu's Tenacious Rival

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: Yair Lapid of the "Beyachat" alliance, which supports Naftali Bennett.

By Jan Kapusnak 

Few Israeli politicians have risen to prominence as unexpectedly as Yair Lapid and remained at the center of national politics for so long. The former television host founded the centrist party "Yesh Atid" (There Is a Future) and later served as finance minister, foreign minister, opposition leader, and ultimately prime minister. In 2021, he formed the coalition that ended Netanyahu's twelve consecutive years in power and set aside his personal ambitions by allowing Naftali Bennett to serve as prime minister first.

Lapid is heading into the 2026 election in a familiar role, but from a weakened political position. After running behind Benny Gantz in the Blue and White Alliance (Kahol Lavan) in 2019 and 2020, he has accepted second place behind Bennett in the new "Beyachad" (Together) alliance. The decision reflects both his willingness to prioritize a greater cause over personal ambitions and the waning confidence among anti-Netanyahu voters that he is the man most likely to defeat the prime minister.

A secular Tel Avivan from a good family

Lapid is a product of Tel Aviv, one of the most liberal cities not only in the Middle East but worldwide. He was born there in 1963 into a prominent family. His mother, Shulamit Lapid, is a renowned novelist and playwright. His father, Tommy Lapid, was a journalist and Holocaust survivor who later became Minister of Justice. As chairman of the secular Shinui Party, the elder Lapid became an outspoken opponent of ultra-Orthodox political power.

Lapid worked as a newspaper columnist, actor, and television host, becoming one of Israel's best-known media personalities. He hosted a popular talk show bearing his name and, later, the influential Friday night news program **Ulpan Shishi**. When he entered politics in 2012, many dismissed him as a celebrity who lacked the necessary experience and expertise. His supporters recognized something that older politicians lacked: the ability to explain complicated issues in accessible language.



Liberal stance, no understanding of the privileges of the ultra-Orthodox

That same year, Lapid founded “Yesh Atid” to represent Israel’s secular, working-class, and military-service-oriented middle class. In response to complaints about the cost of living that fueled the mass protests and tent camps of 2011, the party promised more affordable housing and a more efficient government. It also called for an “equitable sharing of the burden” through military or civilian service for ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) men. Its platform combined centrist economic policies with support for civil marriage, LGBTQ equality, public transportation on Shabbat, and less religious control over private life.

Yesh Atid emerged as the surprise winner of the 2013 election, securing nineteen seats. Lapid joined Netanyahu’s government as finance minister and formed the so-called “Brothers’ Alliance” with Bennett. By coordinating their demands, they kept the ultra-Orthodox parties out of the government and passed laws setting targets for Haredi military and civilian service. The number of recruits rose but remained below the targets. In 2015, when the Haredi parties returned to power, the law was watered down.

An Unsuccessful Tenure as Minister of Finance

Lapid’s tenure as finance minister was less successful. Faced with a large deficit, he raised the value-added tax, reduced government payments to families with children, and cut government spending, even though he had promised to protect working families. Real estate prices continued to rise. His proposal for a zero VAT rate for eligible first-time homebuyers was heavily criticized by economists and never received final approval from the Knesset. As disagreements over the budget, settlement construction, and the stalled peace process made the coalition increasingly unworkable, Netanyahu dismissed Lapid in December 2014 and accused him and Justice Minister Tzipi Livni of plotting a “coup” against him—an accusation both denied. In the subsequent election, “Yesh Atid” plummeted from nineteen to eleven seats.

Netanyahu’s Longtime Rival for Over a Decade

After joining the opposition in 2015, Lapid established himself as one of Netanyahu’s leading rivals. During the various elections in Israel between 2019 and 2021, Yesh Atid joined Gantz’s Kahol Lavan alliance. When Gantz joined a Netanyahu-led government in 2020 as part of a rotation agreement, Lapid refused



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to follow him, calling the decision a betrayal of the alliance's voters. "Their votes were stolen and handed over to Netanyahu as a gift," he declared. His decision preserved his credibility, especially after the coalition collapsed before Gantz could become prime minister.

Resignation from the Office of Governor in the State's Best Interest

After the 2021 election, in which Yesh Atid won seventeen seats, then-President Reuven Rivlin gave Lapid the mandate to form a government after Netanyahu's attempt had failed. Since several right-wing parties were willing to oust Netanyahu but did not want to accept him as prime minister themselves, Lapid offered Bennett the first choice of office, even though his Yamina party held only seven seats. The resulting coalition brought together eight parties, ranging from Bennett's nationalist right through the center and the Zionist left to Mansour Abbas's Islamist Ra'am, the first independent Arab party to join an Israeli government.

A Bridge-Builder to the U.S. and Europe

As foreign minister and deputy prime minister, Lapid worked to improve relations with Washington and European governments, which had been strained during Netanyahu's final years in office. In 2022, he hosted the Negev Summit with the foreign ministers of the United States, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco.

The "Government of Change" lost its majority and collapsed after just over a year. Bennett and Lapid subsequently dissolved the Knesset, and Lapid succeeded Bennett as prime minister in July 2022 as part of their rotation agreement. During his six-month tenure, his government concluded a maritime border agreement with Lebanon and resolved competing claims over gas-rich areas in the Mediterranean.

In the November 2022 election, "Yesh Atid" increased its representation to 24 seats, but the broader party bloc to which Lapid belonged lost. Netanyahu returned to power and led a coalition of right-wing, far-right, and ultra-Orthodox parties. When he handed over the office of prime minister, Lapid warned the new government: "Don't try to destroy the country."

Opposing the Government's Judicial Reform

Lapid became a prominent opponent of the government's judicial reform. He



supported the protest movement against it and accused Netanyahu of sacrificing democratic institutions to remain in power.

The Hamas massacre on October 7, 2023, put Lapid in a more difficult position. He supported the war in Gaza and proposed a narrow emergency government, but only if Netanyahu removed Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich from security decision-making. When Netanyahu instead brought Gantz into the war cabinet, Lapid remained in the opposition. He soon accused Netanyahu of fighting in Gaza without a credible strategy and of hindering the release and return of the hostages through his coalition policies. Lapid repeatedly offered Netanyahu political support for a hostage deal.

In favor of the two-state solution, but not immediately

When it comes to the Palestinians, Lapid positions himself between the traditional left and Netanyahu's right. As prime minister in 2022, he advocated for "an agreement with the Palestinians based on two states for two peoples." October 7 made him significantly more skeptical on this issue. While he continues to support Palestinian statehood in principle, he says that this will not be possible in the coming decade and that the Palestinians must first prove that their state would not become another terrorist base for attacks on Israel.

Questions Regarding Suitability in Terms of Security Policy

Lapid's main weakness is that many Israelis are not convinced he can ensure the country's security in these difficult times. Netanyahu portrays him as a privileged member of Tel Aviv's secular elite who lacks significant military experience. However, Lapid's handling of "Operation Breaking Dawn"—the successful three-day campaign against the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in 2022—strengthened his image on security and narrowed Netanyahu's lead in the polls.

Nevertheless, Lapid is having trouble boosting his popularity. Haredi parties distrust him because of his campaign for mandatory military or civilian service for the ultra-Orthodox and his push for secular reforms. In contrast, a large portion of the traditional, predominantly Mizrahi right wing views him as an arrogant representative of the secular, predominantly Ashkenazi Tel Aviv elite, reflecting Israel's longstanding social and cultural divide between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim. The left, in turn, considers him too right-wing on security issues.



An electoral alliance in the interest of the cause despite ideological differences

The formation of the “Beyachat” electoral alliance with Naftali Bennett was therefore a rational decision on Lapid's part. In April 2026, he and Bennett announced that their parties would run on a joint ticket under Bennett's leadership. Lapid recognized that defeating Netanyahu would require moderate right-wing voters who would never support “Yesh Atid” on its own.

The ideological differences between the two “Beyachat” leaders could, however, resurface. Lapid is more secular and liberal than Bennett and, in principle, continues to support Palestinian statehood, even though he considers it impossible in the coming decade. Bennett, on the other hand, rejects a Palestinian state and has ruled out forming a coalition government with Arab parties.

Nevertheless, Lapid and Bennett now agree on several domestic policy issues, including mandatory service for all Israelis, civil marriage, limited public transportation on Shabbat, and a state commission of inquiry into the events of October 7. It remains to be seen whether this will be enough to keep their alliance alive now that ousting Netanyahu is no longer the overriding goal.

So far, poll results for the alliance with Bennett have been disappointing.

On top of that, “Beyachat” has not yet made the expected breakthrough with voters. A poll by the Kan public broadcaster, published on August 16, showed “Together” with only fourteen seats. That is merely half of the total twenty-eight seats that Bennett's and Lapid's parties had received in the same poll immediately before forming their alliance. Gadi Eisenkot's “Yashar” party and Netanyahu's “Likud” tied for first place in the same poll, each with twenty-three seats. In an August 17 poll by TV Channel 12, “Beyachat” received 15 seats, compared to 24 for “Yashar” and 22 for “Likud.” Instead of uniting the anti-Netanyahu camp, Bennett and Lapid are now being overshadowed by Eisenkot, with both opposition groups vying for many of the same voters.

Neither the government nor the opposition currently appears capable of securing the sixty-one seats needed for a majority in the Knesset. The latest Kan poll gave Netanyahu's bloc 52 seats and the Zionist opposition 57, leaving 11 seats for the Arab parties. According to the Channel 12 poll, the governing bloc would total 50 seats, while the opposition would have 60—one short of a majority.



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Lapid's skill as a coalition builder could tip the scales

The remaining seats would go to the Arab parties. Bennett's refusal to bring the Arab parties on board therefore threatens to lead to another deadlock, even if Netanyahu's coalition loses its majority. Lapid may no longer be the opposition candidate for prime minister, but his willingness to step back into the second row in the interest of the country—and his ability to form unlikely coalitions—could once again make him indispensable.

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