



Security as Priority: Transformations Within Israel's National Security Institutions

Future Briefs

Issue 561, 18 Jul 2021

Meir Ben-Shabbat, Israel's national security advisor and head of the National Security Council, recently announced his intention to step down after serving for four years in office. Ben-Shabbat agreed to Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's request to remain in his post until the end of August to ensure functional continuity of security operations and easier transition for the new government. His departure prompted Bennett's government to look for a successor. Additionally, the new government plans to re-activate the security cabinet, long marginalized by the former government led by Benjamin Netanyahu.

Israel's security establishment

Israel is among the world's most highly security and militarily- oriented political systems, due to the vital role its security institutions play at the domestic and foreign levels to counter threats. The following institutions in particular play a crucial role in the decision-making process.

1- The National Security Council (NSC): the NSC was established in 1999 to protect Israeli citizens, the security and superiority of the state. The Council is responsible for making security policies and dealing with threats facing Tel Aviv. It also plays a crucial supporting role in the security-related decisions made by the cabinet and the so-called security cabinet in co-operation with other government institutions, security and intelligence agencies.

The NSC is a unique body comprising a wide range of military, security and intelligence officials, researchers, diplomats and specialists in technology, law, economy and other relevant fields.

2- The State Security Cabinet (SSC): headed by the prime minister, the SSC functions as a cabinet inside the cabinet. Its major mission is to develop and execute the country's foreign and defense policies. At times of wars and crises, its role is expanded to take swift and effective decisions

Threats to Israel's security

In view of Israel's current security landscape, it is evident that Bennett's government has taken over at a time when Israel is facing diverse security threats and challenges both at home and overseas, which Bennett stressed upon during a confidence vote.

Security as Priority: Transformations Within Israel's National Security Institutions. Future Briefs, Issue 561, 18 Jul 2021, Abu Dhabi, Future for Advanced Research & Studies.

These can be outlined as follows:

1- Rise of the Extremist Right-wing: polarization and tensions within the Israeli society was further deepened following the ousting of Netanyahu's government and extremism intensified that hardline right-wingers made threats to the new cabinet and especially Bennett. Moreover, the government faces other hindrances resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic and its repercussions.

2- Potential Collapse of the Truce: tensions continue to simmer between the Israelis and the Palestinians even though the Operation Guardian of the Walls was completed and a ceasefire was put in place to bring eleven days of fighting to an end. The reason is that there are serious fears that standoffs with the Palestinians can break out between the two sides once again causing the collapse of the truce. This was evidenced in the launch of a flag-waving procession that was endorsed by Netanyahu to which Hamas responded by launching incendiary balloons. The development, coupled with Israel's continued settlement policies, raised concerns over renewed clashes between the Israeli and the Palestinians.

Moreover, the security challenge posed by Hamas exacerbated the situation as the group has been able to maintain and advance its military power by arms smuggling through a network of tunnels. The Israeli security institutions consider Hezbollah as one of the major threats to Israel's security due to its Iran-backed development of precision-guided missiles.

3- Countering the Iranian Threat: the Iran nuclear deal represents one of the major foreign threats that Bennett's government has to deal with, especially because of fears that the US Administration of President Joe Biden would reach a deal with Iran that does not guarantee tight restrictions on Iran's uranium enrichment program.

Additionally, Israel continues to carry out sabotage operations against Iran that are not limited to its nuclear program facilities, such as the attack on the Karaj nuclear research facility in June. Such operations also target Iran's economic assets, with the latest being the cyberattack that caused the cancellation of hundreds of scheduled train trips. No doubt, continued attacks against Iran means that Israel has to anticipate retaliatory reaction from Tehran.

Moreover, Bennett's government plans to develop its capabilities in anticipation of threats posed by Iran. Dubbed Tenufa in Hebrew, the plan will see huge investments in developing the Israeli army's arsenals, including increasing its collection of mid-sized drones, obtaining large numbers of precision-guided missiles from the United States and purchasing additional air defense batteries.

Major shifts within security

The major shifts underway within Israel's security establishments are evident in the following:

1- Choosing a Successor to Ben-Shabbat: former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu appointed Ben Shabbat as national security advisor and head of the National Security Council back in 2017, based on his extensive career. He has an extensive military background due to his work in the Shabak as well as his role in making and carrying out important security decisions and moves, such as Israel's offensive against Gaza Strip. In particular, he played a pivotal role in ensuring the success of normalization agreements signed with several Arab countries.

Ben Shabbat also has a crucial role in ensuring Israel's smooth transition into a new government after Netanyahu's government was ousted. He agreed to remain in his position until a successor is appointed. There are assumptions that the head of government is looking forward to appointing Amos Yadlin, Director of Tel Aviv University's Institute for National Security Studies, as the next head of the National Security Council, based on his extensive career and long security experience. But it was noted that Yadlin might be less hardline than Bennett.

Yadlin was named head of the army's Military Intelligence Directorate after his return from Washington after serving as Israel's military attaché to the United States. In January 2015, Yadlin joined the Zionist Union list for the Knesset elections as its candidate for Ministry of Defense.

2- Reviving the Security Cabinet: under Netanyahu, the Security Cabinet was controlled by the prime minister. But shifts are now sweeping the security landscape after Bennett's government approved the formation of the security cabinet after the departure of Netanyahu. Bennett's office announced that the new security cabinet will hold a



meeting every Sunday immediately after the weekly regular cabinet meeting. This represents a major shift from Netanyahu's tenure, where the former prime minister moved the core security decision-making process from the cabinet to his own hands and inner circle.

Bennett is set to contribute towards restoring the important role of the security cabinet long marginalized by Netanyahu. It should also be noted that a majority of the new members of the security cabinet belong to right-wing parties and embrace a hardline approach to security issues, contrary to the left-wing minority, who are less hardline.

Netanyahu took Bennett's government for granted and claimed that it poses a danger for Israel's security because of the inexperience and political orientations of its members, and the leftist ones in particular. This, in Netanyahu's view, restricts Israel's ability to make crucial and deterrent decisions on Iran's nuclear issue and settlements. It also imposes restrictions on Mossad's clandestine operations, against Iran in particular.

It should be noted here that Netanyahu's allegations are inaccurate, because the security cabinet's members include three former defense ministers, including former minister of defense and deputy prime minister Benny Gantz, who also served as chief of general staff. On top of these members is Bennett himself, who served as a team leader in the elite special-operations forces units such as Sayeret Matkal and Sayeret Maglan. The members also include Avigdor Lieberman, a former minister of defense.


In conclusion, the new Israeli government is likely to prioritize main security issues, especially those involving Iran and the Palestinians in particular. To address these challenges, the cabinet is also likely to continue to revitalize the role of security institutions, especially the National Security Council and the security cabinet. Israel, however, is unlikely to witness radical changes in its leanings, due to the fact that the right-wing, which broke away from Netanyahu, but still embraces his policies and strategies, continues to have dominance and control.

ABOUT FARAS

Future for Advanced Research and Studies (FARAS) is an independent think tank founded on April 4, 2014 in Abu Dhabi, U.A.E. FARAS seeks to enrich public dialogue, support decision-making and enhance academic research pertaining to future trends that currently constitute a real problem in the Middle East region. In light of instability and unpredictability, the overarching goal of FARAS is to help ward off future shocks regarding these developments.

 www.futureuae.com

 Tel: +971 24444513

 P.O Box. 111414 Abu Dhabi