

## **37<sup>th</sup> ISRAELI GOVERNMENT (DECEMBER 2022-PRESENT)**

### **Overview**

The current Israeli government has been in power since the 29<sup>th</sup> December 2022. The coalition government consists of six parties. Likud is the majority coalition partner, led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Netanyahu has served as Prime Minister for over 15 years and this is his sixth term.

The coalition government is supported by minority coalition partners including United Torah Judaism, Shas, Religious Zionist Party, Otzma Yehudit, and Noam. All of the parties are right-wing Zionist parties, as is Netanyahu's party Likud. However, this coalition has been described as Israel's most right-wing government by international media, such as the BBC.<sup>1</sup> This is because three of the parties, the Religious Zionist Party, Otzma Yehudit and Noam are considered to be not only right-wing, but far-right extremists, expressing ultranationalism, Jewish supremacism and anti-Arabism as core aspects of their ideology.

### **Kahanism**

The Religious Zionist Party and Otzma Yehudit (known in English as 'Jewish Power') are also sometimes referred to as Kahanist. Kahanism is an extremist religious ideology<sup>2</sup> that believes in a Jewish theocratic state, where non-Jews have no voting rights. The original Kahanist party, Kach, was banned by the Israeli government in and designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation by the US State Department in 2022. This is especially noteworthy given that the USA considers Israel to be a long-standing ally.<sup>3</sup>

### **Itamar Ben Gvir**

Otzma Yehudit is led by Itamar Ben-Gvir. Ben-Gvir was raised in an extremist environment, as his mother was a member of Irgun,<sup>4</sup> a Zionist terrorist organisation<sup>5</sup> that operated in the Palestinian Mandate from 1931 to 1948. He is a settler who is notorious for previously having a portrait of Baruch Goldstein in his living room.<sup>6</sup> Goldstein was a terrorist who massacred 29 Palestinian Muslim worshippers and wounded 125 others in Hebron in 1994.

Ben Gvir serves as the Minister for National Security in the current government. During the time he has held this role, he also stormed the compound containing the Al-Aqsa Mosque, which drew international condemnation.<sup>7</sup>

### **Bezalel Smotrich**

Bezalel Smotrich is leader of the Religious Zionist Party. He is the Minister of Finance in Netanyahu's current government and he is also a Minister in the Defence Ministry. Like Ben Gvir, Smotrich is also a radical extremist and also a settler. He grew up in the illegal Beit El Settlement in the occupied Golan

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<sup>1</sup> Raffi Berg, R. (22<sup>nd</sup> December 2022) [Israel's most right-wing government agreed under Benjamin Netanyahu](#). BBC.

<sup>2</sup> Asher, A. (2020). ["\(Re-\)Making the State: Religious Zionism, Religious Violence, and Israel in the 21st Century"](#). Macalester College: Religious Studies Department.

<sup>3</sup> "U.S. Dept. of State. (April 2005) [Country Reports on Terrorism 2004](#). US Dept of State. Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism.

<sup>4</sup> Margalit, R. (2023) [Ben Gvir, Israel's Minister of Chaos](#). The New Yorker.

<sup>5</sup> Bowyer Bell, J. (1979). [Terror out of Zion : Irgun Zvai Leumi, LEHI, and the Palestine underground, 1929-1949](#). Dublin: Academy Press. ISBN 978-0-906187-11-1.

<sup>6</sup> Agence France Press. (27<sup>th</sup> October 2022) [Israel's far-right leader Ben-Gvir wins adoring young fans](#). France24.

<sup>7</sup> Al Jazeera (27<sup>th</sup> July 2023) [Israeli far-right minister leads incursion of Al-Aqsa compound](#).

Heights. In 2005, he was arrested on terror charges for attempting to blow up a motorway in protest against Israel's disengagement from Gaza. He was in possession of 700 litres of petrol at the time of his arrest. Following the February 2023 Huwara rampage by Israeli settlers, Smotrich was criticised of 'incitement of genocide' when he said that the State of Israel should 'wipe out' Huwara.<sup>8</sup>

Since February 2023, Smotrich has held a Ministerial role in the Defence Ministry. This has allowed the Defence Minister, Yoav Gallant, to transfer some government powers in the occupied West Bank from the territory's military commander to Smotrich. It is the first time a civilian has had administrative powers for the occupied West Bank, and it has been criticised by Michael Sfard, a high-profile Israeli lawyer, as an anointment of Smotrich, an illegal settler, as the de facto governor of the West Bank.<sup>9</sup> As an occupation is meant to be conducted by the military, Sfard considers this administrative move is a de facto annexation of the West Bank. It represents an escalation of the entrenched occupation that Israel has subjected Palestinians to in the occupied Palestinian territories since 1967.

### **Political crisis with Israeli courts and 'reasonableness doctrine'**

One of the most significant political developments of the new government is the focus within Israel on the illiberal move to reform and weaken the Supreme Court. Specifically, the new law would prohibit Israeli courts from using the "reasonableness doctrine" to review decisions made by the Israeli cabinet and government ministers regarding administrative law.<sup>10</sup> In theory, the "reasonableness doctrine" allows courts to make judgements based on how a "reasonable person" would interpret a situation.

This reform is heavily criticised by Liberal Zionists and pro-Israel Western governments, who argue that the unicameral (one-chamber) system in Israel and the lack of a constitution beyond Israel's Basic Laws means that the courts are vital to ensuring democratic checks and balances. These reforms have led to widespread and pervasive protests in Israel.

However, protesters have framed the issue of the decline of Israel's thriving democracy. The persecution, dispossession and dehumanisation of Palestinians has been downplayed at best, or completely ignored at worst. Even with the "reasonableness doctrine", Palestinian people have been targeted by violence and subjected to dispossession.

### **Changes in language, but continuation in actions**

The rhetoric of the current government's far-right extremist ministers has attracted ample attention in the press and international community. As egregious as this language is, it is a departure from previous governments only in the fact that it is more explicit and direct in its objectives. In contrast, the actions of the current Israeli government broadly mark a continuation in the expropriation of Palestinian land and property, the enforcement of apartheid and the superiority of the Jewish population's rights over the rights of the indigenous Palestinian population. These actions are underpinned by the ideological foundations of Zionism, perhaps summarised most succinctly by the Nation-State Law, passed in 2018, which declared that "The right to exercise national self-determination in the State of Israel is unique to the Jewish people."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Middle East Eye. (2<sup>nd</sup> March 2023) [Rights groups urge US to ban Israel's Smotrich over call to 'wipe out' Huwara.](#)

<sup>9</sup> Sfard, M. (8<sup>th</sup> June 2023) [Israel Is Officially Annexing the West Bank.](#) Foreign Policy.

<sup>10</sup> Sommer, A. K. (20<sup>th</sup> June 2023) [What Israel's 'Reasonableness Standard' Is and Why Axing It Is Dangerous.](#) Haaretz.

<sup>11</sup> Knesset. (2018) [Basic Law: Israel – The Nation State of the Jewish People. \[English Translation\].](#) 5788-2018.