



# FPC distinguished fellow in strategic studies Victoria Coates quoted in the Washington Examiner regarding Middle East politics.

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**Related Expert:** Victoria Coates

Netanyahu comeback tour complicates Biden's Middle East overtures

by Joel Gehrke, Foreign Affairs Reporter

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Israeli opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu could be on the path back to power at an inconvenient time for President Joe Biden and congressional Democrats.

A crucial defection from Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's right-wing political party has forced the dissolution of a unity government tailor-made last year to oust then-Prime Minister Netanyahu. The crack-up could complicate Biden's overtures to U.S. allies in the Middle East at a fraught moment for both American strategy regarding Iran and the wider international oil markets, while the political pressures that hamstrung Bennett could bring Netanyahu, who had a tense relationship with the Obama-Biden administration, to a parliamentary victory in the fall.

Bennett and center-left Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid moved to dissolve their government and call for Israel's fifth election since 2019 after a legislative defeat spurred a member of Bennett's small political bloc to leave the coalition, thereby depriving them of their governing majority. The proximate cause for their diminution was the failure of a bill that would apply Israeli law to Israeli settlers living in the West Bank, which the United Nations regards as under illegal occupation by Israel, but the controversy reflected the success of Netanyahu's allies in attacking Bennett's small group of right-wingers who aligned with Lapid and the Israeli Arabs.

"They just chipped away, day in and day out, at [Bennett's] base, vilifying and also pressuring the [other] members of this party," Foundation for Defense of Democracies Vice President Jonathan Schanzer said. "That was the goal of [Netanyahu] and the other right-wing coalitions, the coalition members from [Netanyahu's] previous years. They just needed to peel away one or two members of [Bennett's] Yemina party."

That coalition put Bennett — on paper, one of the weakest political figures to emerge from last year's elections, as his party secured only seven seats — in a strange position. He had a golden opportunity to leap into the prime minister's office, at the expense of his former ally, but it required a deal with ideological forces he has opposed throughout his career.

"I think, for starters, Bennett's done," said former White House deputy national security adviser Victoria Coates, who specialized in Middle East issues during the Trump presidency. "So it was basically held together with gum and Band-Aids for a year, but when you have [a prime minister] whose whole political raison d'être is being the most right-wing, [who's] in a coalition with the Arab faction, that's just not tenable."

The faltering of this unity government comes at an awkward time for the United States. Biden's team is preparing for a presidential tour of the Middle East with stops in Israel and Saudi Arabia. Biden needs to secure increased oil production in Riyadh, and the continuing failure of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal renewal talks is putting pressure on the U.S., Israel, and the Gulf Arabs to develop a new strategy to counter Tehran.

"This visit is vital for Israel," said Bennett, explaining that his country would "finalize a clear joint plan of action together with the U.S. to stop Iran's nuclear program" and also work on "strengthening regional architectures between the more moderate actors in the region."

A template for that project has formed in Congress, where the Senate has agreed to mandate the Pentagon "to establish a defense architecture and acquisitions approach that would employ a combination of air and missile defense capabilities to protect the region from attacks by Iran and Iran-backed extremist groups," Sen. Joni Ernst (R-IA) announced earlier this month. That initiative is set to include not only Israel and the United Arab Emirates, which normalized relations with Israel during the Trump presidency under the Abraham Accords, but also "Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia ... and other allies and partners in the Middle East," according to her office.

Now, Biden will not meet with Bennett but rather Lapid, who is taking over as an interim prime minister until the next government can form. The aforementioned project will be favored by a strong majority of Israeli lawmakers, whether they are from the current coalition or Netanyahu loyalists.

"I don't think any of the fundamentals have changed on the normalization front. ... It just creates questions," Schanzer said. "You generally don't see [as an analogy] America making major deals in between a November election and a January inauguration. ... The thing is, there's still ample reason to think that the stars are aligning."

Netanyahu projected confidence about his future just one year after the combination of corruption allegations and rivalries across the Israeli Right stopped him just short of the legislative votes needed to remain atop the Israeli government.

"I intend to form a strong, national, steady government," Netanyahu said Monday. "I think the atmosphere changed. I can feel it. I hear from the people ... some of whom did not vote for me, and they say, 'We now want the real change — we want to return the state of Israel to the place it deserves,' and I intend to do it together with my friends."

That's the buoyant attitude of a man who kept a white-knuckle grip on the prime minister's office through four grueling elections in two years only to find himself outmaneuvered at the last minute by a political bloc that decided to put his defeat ahead of their ideological differences. Now, Lapid and his fractured alliance have to find a way to stop Netanyahu from turning the tables on them, starting with his reported plan to poach the most recent defector into a future coalition with his party.

"Such a thing can't happen without being investigated. We will make sure that it's investigated," Lapid said Tuesday. "The law prohibits offering a guaranteed party spot to someone in order for them to vote against the government. ... It's illegal."

Netanyahu's legal problems have contributed to the slow-motion political crisis that forced Israel into so many successive elections. Yet Bennett risked alienating his natural political base when he cut the deal with Lapid after the elections last year. If Netanyahu can woo Bennett's right-wing voters into his own Likud party, then this latest round could be an extinction-level event for Bennett's political career.

"I don't see a political future for Bennett. I think he had his year as prime minister and he'll go join a think tank, and that'll be his lane," said Coates.

Netanyahu would be on familiar ground, in the prime minister's office opposite an American president with whom he has had no shortage of political disagreements, most especially the efficacy of the 2015 Iran deal the Obama-Biden administration negotiated.

"If Netanyahu is back in [the fall], we're in a whole [other] world because they don't like each other, and we're going to be in a bad spot," Coates said.

And if Republicans retake Congress, she added, then Biden will have to veto "all sorts of pro-Israel, anti-two state solution" legislation that Netanyahu would likely favor. "And that's going to cause a lot of trouble," she said.

That said, Netanyahu could still founder on the same rocks that doomed him to the opposition last year.

"This is a win for [Netanyahu], but whether it is a victory long term remains to be seen," Schanzer said. And if he does, he said, "Biden may not relish the idea of a Bibi return ... but the two men have known each other for decades. They'll make it work regardless of which way the political winds blow in Washington."