

# Benjamin Netanyahu is back

To everybody's surprise, in the night of May 6 to 7, Shaul Mofaz, leader of the centrist "Kadima" party accepted an alliance with Benjamin Netanyahu, current PM of Israel and leader of the right wing Likoud party. This agreement is a victory for Bibi as he is nicknamed in Israel, who thus signs his comeback both nationally and internationally. Indeed, his attitude towards Iran and his determination to use force had been strongly criticized in Israel and abroad. No doubt the alliance just sealed between Likoud and Kadima now gives Bibi a solid majority in the Knesset [1] and the assurance of unfailing support for his policy in the case of a major conflict with Iran.

## The criticism Benjamin Netanyahu faced

To understand why Benjamin Netanyahu faced political difficulties both in Israel and in the United States, we need to remember that what has characterized Netanyahu on the world scene has been his aggressive policy towards Iran. It has been his trademark since 2009 (date of his second accession to the post of PM of Israel). More recently Bibi declared that "there were still people who wanted to annihilate the Jewish people today as in the past. The Iranian regime calls for and openly acts for our destruction while feverishly developing atomic weapons to reach these objectives. Whoever sees the Iranian threat as a fantasy has failed to learn anything from the Shoah" [2]. The tone is set. Benjamin Netanyahu has a mission, that of alerting the world to the threat posed by Iran to Israel and the rest of the world.

However, not everybody agrees with this presentation of Iran and of its so called aggressive designs on Israel. Some question Benjamin Netanyahu's choices and they are not only political opponents, but also senior military officials, and people who do not have or no longer have a political careers to defend. First there is Meir Dagan former head of Mossad [3] who opposed Netanyahu, claiming that "an air attack against Iran's nuclear reactors would be senseless (...) It would be a reckless adventure. It could trigger a regional war: with thousands of missiles being fired by Iran and Hezbollah" [4]. Such an attack from a former Mossad Head would not have had much impact if it were isolated.

But, it is not: Yuval Diskin, former director of Shabak [5] said to the Israeli Newspaper Haaretz "I do not trust the current leadership, I do not think they have what it takes to manage such a major event as a regional war or a war with Iran (...). I neither trust the PM (B. Netanyahu), nor the Minister of defense (E. Barak). I do not trust a leadership which makes decisions based on messianic feelings". [6] What Diskin says here is that Netanyahu is not qualified enough to lead Israel given the way he makes decisions, that we can in no way believe a man who nevertheless claimed in an interview with Richard Stengel "Do not believe, check". [7]

How can we believe the Current Israeli Premier when so many former senior army officials challenge his, to say the least, divisive method for solving the Israeli- Iranian conflict?

This all the more as, to the former heads of Mossad and Shin Beth, we can add the former Chief of Staff of Tsahal until February 2011 [8]. Indeed, the latter has declared that sanctions, rather than military intervention are the best way to counteract the Iranian nuclear program [9].

Worse, the current chief of staff of Tsahal Benny Gantz, the successor of Ashkenazi, has sharply opposed B Netanyahu, claiming that "Iran has not yet decided to make the final leap

(...). If the supreme guide Ayatollah Khomeini so wishes, he will move towards the acquisition of a nuclear bomb, but the decision still has to be made". Even Ehud Barak, the current Defense Minister guarantees that "Iran has not yet decided to build a nuclear weapon (April 2012). Thus Bibi found himself considerably isolated politically in the last few months when it came to his will to make pre-emptive strikes against Iranian Nuclear power stations rather than conduct a policy of economic sanctions.

Beyond the borders of Israel, discordant voices have also been heard concerning the option of an attack on Iran by Israel. They come from Israel's main ally, the United States. The former director of the CIA, and current Defense Secretary Leon Panetta estimated when interviewed in the *60 minutes* program that Iran had not yet decided to develop an atomic bomb [10], information confirmed by James Clapper, the current US Director of Intelligence in front of the Senate's intelligence Committee [11].

### **Was this Netanyahu-Mofaz alliance so unpredictable?**

The announcement that Shaul Mofaz the leader of Kadima had rallied the right wing coalition led by Netanyahu came as a surprise to most newspapers. The centrist party Kadima was the main opposition to the Netanyahu government and its Leader Mofaz regularly criticized Netanyahu. We shall nevertheless attempt to show that when Shaul Mofaz joined the government coalition during the night of the 7th to 8th May 2012 enabling B. Netanyahu to secure a large majority in the Knesset (94 seats out of 120), he was not the leader of the opposition but a political ally of Netanyahu.

In fact when we consider the personality of Shaul Mofaz, we understand that there is nothing unpredictable in this alliance and that it was logical if we consider the man's past.

Who is Shaul Mofaz? As a soldier he served in an elite commando unit of Tsahal in which B. Netanyahu and his brother Yomi also served. Mofaz also took part in the Entebbe raid in 1976 with Y. Netanyahu. When one knows the ties of brotherhood between soldiers, in particular in the commando units, it is obvious that the political union between Netanyahu and Mofaz was anything but unpredictable. Instead of seeing it as a reconciliation between majority and opposition, it would be more relevant to see it as a national unity pact signed between two "comrades in arms".

S. Mofaz later became a general and was responsible for the crack down on the second intifada (2000-2005). To crush this Intifada, he required each brigade (there were 7) to execute at least 10 Palestinians daily, which according to General Yitzak Eitan (head of Central Command) "70 Palestinians killed every day" [12]. This management of the Palestinian rebellion was often strongly criticized on the left and highlights S. Mofaz's lack of scruples when it came to joining forces with Netanyahu who favors using force against Iran. Far from being a pacifist, Mofaz is more of a hawk.

Finally, politically speaking, he was logically close to Netanyahu and like him a member of Likoud, which is in favor of a hard line towards Yasser Arafat. After losing internal elections to Netanyahu, he resigned and joined Kadima becoming its leader on March 27, 2012.

What we need to understand is that, considering S. Mofaz's record, it is no longer relevant to label Kadima as a centrist party in 2012 and that it would more appropriate to describe it as a right wing party. If indeed Kadima's rank and file have not changed their opinions, it is now

obvious that S. Mofaz is above all ideologically bent to the right. His friendship with religious extremist party leaders: Eli Yishai (Parti Shas) and Moshé Gafni (Parti Yahadut Hatorah) [13] is witness to this.

## **Conclusion**

Netanyahu, leader of the right wing coalition, now enjoys a strong majority in the Knesset (99 seats) consisting of Kadima (28 seats), Likoud (27 seats), Israel Beitenou (15), Shas (11), Yahadut Hatorah (5), and Mafdal (3). More than a marriage of convenience justified by the need for a stable majority, we are witnessing a love match between two leaders eager to intervene in Iran as soon as possible [14]. This political move also shows that Netanyahu is a clever strategist: he has easily succeeded in rallying a friend, while making only a few concessions [15] and in ensuring himself strong internal political legitimacy, which enables him to make a comeback on the national and international scene - in particular on the Iranian issue.

## **Edouard d’Espalungue**

Notes:

[1] The Israeli parliament

[2] Speech made for Yom HaShoah, commemoration day of the Shoah in Israël, April 19 2012

[3] Foreign Israeli secret service operating exclusively outside Israel and the occupied territories.

[4] Said on May 6 2011 at a conference in Israël

[5] – or Shinbet – domestic Israeli secret service operating exclusively inside Israel and the occupied territories.

[6] “Diskin : PM, Barak are motivated by messianism, I don’t trust them” by Bark RAVID, Haaretz, 29/04/2012

[7] TIME, Vol. 179, No. 21/ 2012 (“Don’t trust. Verify”)

[8] The name of the Israeli army

[9] Quoted by D. HOROWITZ in Times of Israel , April 30, 2012

[10] On CBS (January 29,2012)

[11] January 31, 2012

[12] in *Boomerang*, written by Ofer SHELAH (Yedioth Aharonot) and Raviv DRUCKER (Channel 10)

[13] Jerusalem Post 05/15/2012 by Gil HOFFMANN

[14] « In June the Israeli air force reportedly carried out large-scale manoeuvres that simulated an aerial attack on Iranian nuclear installations, and Transport Minister Shaul Mofaz sparked a minor international storm when he warned that if Iran continued its alleged weapons program, Israel would be left with no option but to attack Israel ». (2011). Encyclopædia Britannica.

[15] Kadima was not given any ministries; it only heads the Foreign Affairs, Defense and Economic affairs Parliamentary Committee