

REPORT

An Atmosphere of Tension and Incitement at Home Forebodes a Hard Week in Israel

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المعهد الدولي للدراسات الإيرانية
International Institute for Iranian Studies



Since Yair Lapid – the leader of Yesh Atid – announced that he had managed to win the support of both rightwing and leftwing parties to form the next government—more than two years after failing to form a government —the protests of rightwing supporters against what is known as the “change government” coalition have not stopped, nor have the campaigns of incitement against rightwing members of this government.

Among the remarkable events over the past days is the letter [issued](#) by senior religious Zionist rabbis, including rabbis Haim (Chaim) Druckman, Shlomo Aviner and Shmuel Eliyahu on June 5, 2021, titled “Israel Rabbis’ Call.” This letter called on Israelis to do everything in their power to ensure that the new government is thwarted.

The letter also states: “This government runs completely counter to the will of the people as definitively expressed in the last election. It is not too late, it is certainly possible.”

This letter was signed by dozens of rabbis, including Chairman of Kedumim religious school Yitzhak Ben Shachar, head of the Netivot Israel yeshiva in Bat Yam Rabbi David Chai HaCohen and President of Yeshivat Nir Kiryat Arba Eliezer Waldman.

In the letter, the rabbis reiterated: “We cannot accept a reality in which a government will be formed in Israel that will harm the most fundamental matters of religion and state that were accepted since the establishment of the State of Israel and until today by all Israeli governments.”

The letter noted: “There is no doubt that security matters that concern the core of our existence will also be harmed by this government, as it relies on [supporters of terrorism](#) and ministers who call on the International Court of Justice in The Hague to investigate IDF commanders for war crimes.” According to the six rabbis who issued this letter, for these reasons, “we must make an effort to do everything so that this government does not materialize.”

This letter supported the rightwing protestors who gathered in front of the homes of Nir Orbach, Ayelet Shaked and Yamina party Chairman Naftali Bennett. They chanted slogans against these politicians in particular, who betrayed the rightwing camp by joining a government which includes leftist politicians and terrorist backers, in reference to the Arab members.

The religious Zionist party – one of the parties constituting the Benjamin Netanyahu bloc which protected him over the past two years—decided—along with other rightwing organizations—to stage a flag march over the coming days, which is expected to involve fierce clashes with security forces.

Rightwing protestors held up placards, most of which included

plain threats to the rightwing representatives in the “change government:” Naftali Bennett, Ayelet Shaked and Gideon Sa’ar.

Social media platforms were also flooded with threats against the “change government,” especially targeting its rightwing members who are considered by rightwing protestors as “the ones who betrayed the camp, and blocked establishing a rightwing government in Israel.”

These threats included a message sent to Gideon Sa’ar, the head of the New Hope party, which splintered from the Likud party, on his Facebook account. The message said that Sa’ar will attend the funeral of his children this year. This atmosphere filled with tension and incitement [prompted](#) Nadav Argamant, the head of the Israeli security agency Shabak, to issue a cautionary statement on the evening of Saturday, June 5, 2021, in which he warned of the recent spread of dangerous rhetoric and incitement in the country’s public sphere. He added that it is likely that some groups will interpret these inflammatory slogans and zealous speeches as a call for carrying out physical attacks.

Argamant’s statement, which was issued without coordination with the Benjamin Netanyahu government, said that: “The state of Israel is committed to freedom of speech, because it’s an important and necessary principle in a democratic country. However, we have noticed an alarming spike in violent and inciteful discourse, especially on social media. This discourse involves dangerous phrases and statements, exclusionary and inflammatory terms as well as calls for violence and physical attacks.”

It added: “In my capacity as the chairman of the agency responsible for the security of the state, the democratic system and its institutions, I call out and warn that this discourse could be soon interpreted by certain groups or individuals as an approval of mounting illegal acts of violence which could lead to harming individuals.”

Argamant called on Israel's elites and opinion leaders to stand up against this discourse. He said: "In addition to the responsibility shouldered by Shabak and the other law enforcement agencies, a tremendous responsibility yet rests on the shoulders of all public elites from across the spectrum, opinion leaders, clerics, educators and all the citizens of Israel. We should come out with an unambiguous and firm call for immediately ceasing this violent and inciteful discourse. It's the responsibility of all of us to calm the atmosphere and curb this harsh rhetoric."

In this context, security officials said that the extraordinary statement issued by Shabak's head at this timing explains the broader intelligence picture, not only what is posted on social media platforms.

"There's a harsh rhetoric which makes the blood boil, and it's directed at a certain politician," they said, adding: "It's not confined to Twitter and social media platforms. And this is like a fire that cannot be controlled. There are horrible posts on social media platforms, and we don't know who follows them and who is working to execute them."

"These people are responsible for posting the pictures of anybody. And there is fear that things could become worse. This has to come to an end, and the element of time is decisively important."

Yet, Israel's Minister of Defense Benny Gantz touched on the statement issued by the head of Shabak. He said: "The leaders of the public shoulder a special responsibility. The past days have revealed that we didn't learn from the lessons of the past events. All those who attempt to strip the fundamental democratic measures of legitimacy and fan the flames of incitement will also be held accountable. I call on everybody to abandon all forms of violence, and this is the time where the leaders of the community should stand up publicly, firmly and effectively to violence in general, and political violence in particular."

Ron Ben-Yishai, a military affairs commentator, adds that the warning issued by the head of Shabak is reminiscent of a similar warning issued by the former head of Shabak Karmi Gelon in 1994 before the killing of Yitzhak Rabin. At that time, Gelon called for dialogue with the then head of the opposition Benjamin Netanyahu and warned him that the rightwing and settler protests as well as the religious edicts against Rabin, the pictures that featured Rabin wearing the Palestinian keffiyeh or the Nazi uniform and the inflammatory statements from Zion Square could spark violence that leads to killings. Gelon recalled the killing of the leftist activist Emil Grunzweig by Yonah Avrushmi during a rally staged by the Peace Now movement in 1983.

Though Netanyahu at that time refrained from delivering inflammatory speeches, he did not do what Gelon asked him to do.

It seems that the current head of Shabak has learned from past lessons. He —like Gelon at that time—fears all forms of zealous recklessness and violence on the street, especially by rightwing activists, who are — with the encouragement of the current prime minister— pressuring to block the establishment of the “change government” headed by Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid.

The slogans chanted on June 5, 2021 in front of the homes of Nir Orbach, Ayelet Shaked and Yamina party Chairman Naftali Bennett as well as the remarks of the rabbis to block the formation of the government were reminiscent of the campaign of incitement in the days leading up to the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in 1994.

Therefore, Argamant—unlike Gelon in the past —decided to make a public call to calm the atmosphere and at the same time make Netanyahu bear moral responsibility as Israel’s prime minister to pacify the people who are angry and to moderate the public discourse.

Argamant is attempting to bar the flag march, which will be staged by the religious Zionist party and other rightwing organizations and is scheduled to be held next week, which could lead to sparking tensions in Jerusalem again. The head of Shabak issuing a public warning makes it harder for politicians to dismiss it, particularly for Netanyahu to bypass it.

For his part, Rabbi Haim (Chaim) Druckman [dismissed](#) on late Saturday evening the allegations that the rabbis calling on the Bennet-Lapid government formation to be thwarted involved incitement. In video footage commenting on the warning issued by the head of Shabak, he said: “The letter doesn’t involve any incitement. Incitement is only a figment of the imagination of those who allege this.”

Yair Netanyahu, the son of the current prime minister, commented on the statement issued by the head of Shabak in a Twitter post.

He tweeted: “What a shame! Over the past two years, the Left has vehemently incited against the prime minister, against me and against our family and all the media outlets. However, the heads of Shabak, police and public prosecution remained silent. Now, they are attempting to muzzle the rightwing and label any criticism as incitement.”

This highly charged atmosphere amid the emergence of a new political reality forebodes a tense week in Israel until the approval of the Bennet-Lapid cabinet next Wednesday or Thursday by the Knesset. Waiting for the final outcome suits both sides amid their ongoing bone-crushing battle.



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