



Amos Biderman

# Meltdown mode

From Qalqilyah to Jerusalem, everyone is asking: Will Benjamin Netanyahu freeze or defrost plans for new housing? Meanwhile, Isaac Herzog got a shot in the arm from an unusual place for his Labor leadership bid

**Yossi Verter**

Observing the actions of the Netanyahu government over the past week, the Yiddish word “*partach*” springs to mind. Shoddiness, improvisation, amateurishness, charlatanism – all are encapsulated in this term, which so aptly describes what’s transpired with respect to two big issues on the agenda: the construction plan for Qalqilyah and the thawing of the building freeze in Jewish neighborhoods over the Green Line in East Jerusalem.

The story involving Qalqilyah was widely discussed in the media. Last September, the diplomatic-security cabinet, which is ostensibly the government’s more serious forum, discussed approval of a master plan for the Palestinian city, situated in the West Bank not far from Kfar Sava. The fact that there was a discussion is more or less the only thing about which there is agreement. All the rest – what the ministers were told, what they decided, how many housing units were actually approved (6,000 or 14,000), was the plan supposed to be about retroactively approving apartments built without permits and/or about new construction – and a long list of other questions – turned into a “Rashomon” of competing versions. That of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was the most original of them: He didn’t remember what had been decided. How convenient. From here, the path to the dispute that developed between ministers from Likud and Habayit Hayehudi, on the one hand, and Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman, and to a lesser extent Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, was a short one.

That last sentence is liable to induce a double-take. The right versus Lieberman. Once again, the defense minister is playing the part of the responsible, statesman-like, professional official. The metamorphosis he’s undergone over the past 10 months would make great material for a documentary. He stepped in to defend the original target of the Likud ministers’ wrath, Coordinator of Government Activity in the Territories Maj. Gen. Yoav “Poli” Mordechai, whom they marked as the guilty party, whatever the charge, ac-

curring him of misleading them about the plans for Qalqilyah. Going after Mordechai was easier than taking on the prime minister.

The defense minister wasn’t only defending the army here. This is the first time he’s been perceived as acting on behalf of “the Arabs,” as one Likud minister put it. “We didn’t choose Qalqilyah by chance,” he told Yisrael Beiteinu lawmakers on Monday. “Qalqilyah has been one of the quietest cities throughout the recent wave of terror attacks. This is part of my ‘carrot and stick’ plan.”

Lieberman called criticism of Mordechai and Israel Defense Forces Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot by right-wing ministers – including Zeev Elkin, Miri Regev and Ofir Akunis – “outrageous and unacceptable.” “Attack me,” Lieberman said. “Leave the army alone. It’s harming national security.”

As soon as the defense minister put himself on the line, the politicians diverted their fire in his direction. He got hit by Ministers Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked, and by Yossi Dagan, head of the Samaria Regional Council.

How deliciously ironic: Over a year ago, in the spring of 2016, the political and settler right initiated a secret operation meant to thwart Zionist Union from joining the government. At the time, there were contacts between that party’s leader, Isaac Herzog, and Netanyahu, regarding a possible unity government and a move to convene a regional summit that would jump-start negotiations with the Palestinians. The settlers and their representatives were terrified that peace was at the door, with a Palestinian state not far behind.

There was a two-pronged goal back then: to keep Herzog and Zionist Union out, and to slip forceful opposition lawmaker Avigdor Lieberman into Netanyahu’s razor-thin coalition, which seemed to be teetering on the verge of collapse. The operation was spearheaded by Elkin, Shaked and Dagan; the mission was accomplished.

I asked Elkin this week if he regretted what they had done – whether the

operation had been a success but the patient is, well, not so great. No, he said, “Lieberman is still better than Zionist Union.”

If Herzog were defense minister, I pointed out, Netanyahu would be getting in his way on every little issue, which he’s not doing with Lieberman. They seem perfectly coordinated. Elkin sighed. “Well, it’s all theoretical anyway.”

What isn’t theoretical is the settlers’ anger at Netanyahu, which was further ratcheted up after the Qalqilyah debacle. These most spoiled and entitled Jews found themselves feeling jealous of their Palestinian neighbors in Area C, because of all the abundance the government is to shower on them (by 2035) – while back home in the settlements, the building freeze continues.

In Gush Etzion, one of the major blocs of settlement that’s part of the so-called consensus, no construction has been approved. The plan to relocate people evacuated from the Ulpana neighborhood of Beit El has been floating around for five years – although initial infrastructure work has begun in the area slated for the former residents of the illegal outpost of Amona. Netanyahu even posted a photo of bulldozers there on his Face-

book page, along with a declaration, in Hebrew, that “there has not been and will not be a better government than this” when it comes to the settlement enterprise.

This did not satisfy the poor, deprived settlers. Eight years they heard from Netanyahu how he wanted to build, to cover the land with homes, kindergartens, health clinics – what not – but that the evil Barack Obama was preventing him from doing so. After Trump was elected, Netanyahu asked for patience, until after inauguration day. Once the new president was in the White House, the prime minister asked again for an indefinite respite, until it became clear what was happening with the peace initiative taking shape in Washington. I’ll get back to you, he promised. Maybe he got back to them with sweet words about their pioneering Zionism, but construction permits? No way.

In its most recent edition, the weekly Basheva, the most influential newspaper in the settler community, ran a brief headline: “Embracing and freezing.” Next to it was a summary of the main points of an article by settler leader Yaa-kov Katz: “Replace Netanyahu.”

The prime minister sees such things

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## MELT

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and gets stressed out. These are his supporters. Without their votes streaming in during the last election, it's doubtful he'd be sitting where he is today.

The pressure worked: The day the American president's son-in-law and adviser, Jared Kushner, landed this week in Israel with the special envoy to the Middle East, Jason Greenblatt, it was announced that the prime minister had directed the planning department of the Jerusalem Municipality to unfreeze plans to build 6,500 to 7,000 new housing units for Jews over the Green Line. Of course, for years he's been saying there was no freeze on construction in the city. Maybe he just doesn't remember.

### Making lemonade

There are just 13 days remaining until the Labor Party leadership primary and the land is on fire. (Not really; it's passed out from boredom.) Still, every once in a while, things happen.

This week Haaretz and Channel 2 news reported on surveys that Netanyahu conducted prior to disbanding his government in 2014, by means of which he sought to find out what would be perceived as a legitimate and credible pretext for calling an early election. Also revealed were materials from a 2015 Likud election campaign, which was shelved, that included an image of Isaac Herzog as a drag queen.

The picture had appeared online at the time, but without being associated with any party. Now it emerges that despite previous denials, it and other materials were submitted to the state comptroller by the Likud faction, which is obligated by law to provide full transparency concerning what it laid out money for in election campaigns.

Nir Hefetz, who served as head of PR for the Likud campaign, says he never saw the images, nor did Netanyahu; indeed, there is no evidence that either of them knew about them. But Netanyahu is known as a highly involved director of operations during election season. He demands to know about every sign, every poster, every slogan, every video – down to the level of punctuation and camera angles. Nothing escapes him. During the 2015 campaign, this tendency was taken to new heights. The entire op-

eration was run from the premier's official residence by those whom disgruntled and sidelined party officials referred to as "the father, the son and the holy ghost." A secret digital campaign that doesn't leave any party fingerprints was run by friends of Yair Netanyahu, who had served with him in the IDF Spokesperson's Unit.

So who exactly knew what and when? We'll probably never know. But it's worth refreshing the memory: The last election was the most rowdy and violent since 1981. This time the right didn't throw tomatoes at the left in the city square: It hurled filth at and committed character assassination of the left in the established media and on the ever-murmuring internet.

Habayit Hayehudi compared Zionist Union candidate Yossi Yona to Hamas. Herzog and his co-leader Tzipi Livni were depicted in Likud campaign propaganda as ISIS collaborators. And on Election Day, Netanyahu had no qualms about posting a false and racist video warning about Arabs "heading to the polls in droves," transported by "buses from the left." Compared to these examples, and that was only a sampling, the photo-montage of Herzog seems more like a childish, tasteless prank – something that should be more embarrassing to whoever produced it than to its subject.

Opinions in political circles are divided as to whether the revelations this week damaged or benefited Herzog, and to what extent. On the one hand, the image presents him as nerdy, weak and effeminate, traits



Samia, in 2012 photo. Half of a two-headed leadership?

Eliyahu Hershkovitz

that in macho and militaristic Israel are not considered leadership qualities. On the other hand, he was the main topic of public discussion this week. There was buzz around him. He was seen as a victim. A tortured saint.

Labor voters who felt uncomfortable on his behalf, or were angered by Likud's crude and primitive homophobia may even channel these feelings into a vote for him on July 4. For his part, Herzog seems to believe in that scenario. He's squeezed every last drop of juice out of this lemon, giving a bunch of media interviews and dispatching his wife Michal to the Facebook front to decry the way he was treated. He kept the story in the headlines as much as possible. He even went so far as to post on his Twitter account the drag-queen image juxtaposed with

the notorious picture that appeared on a poster of Yitzhak Rabin in a kaffiyeh, dating to just before he was assassinated. That was definitely overkill.

### Me and my shadow

On Wednesday, Herzog received messages of support from two fellow Labor members: Tel Aviv Mayor Ron Huldai and Maj. Gen. (res.) Yom Tov Samia, the latter of whom plans to run for a slot on the party's Knesset list.

Huldai wrote a Facebook post in which he dissected the party's situation, outlining its weaknesses and strengths, its needs and its vision. He said he was supporting Herzog because he has the "ability to reach agreements and create alliances – inside and outside the party – which is

what we need to be able to form the broadest front possible in order to replace the government."

Samia's lengthy post focuses almost exclusively on himself. Herzog is just a passing shadow, an extra in Samia's exercise in self-glorification. He clearly thinks very highly of himself. He begins by writing that he decided to support Herzog after engaging in "deep thought and a long-term strategic vision." Is this guy a general or what?

He then names each one of the communities (20 in all, including regional councils) that he visited as part of his whistlestop trip to gain support for his big in the Labor primary, and then lists all the positions he held in the IDF, from company commander on up, and his myriad great achievements in the army and in business. Here and there he remembers to mention the name of the Labor leadership candidate, but each time appends his own name to Herzog's: "Together with Herzog, we will lead the country to a new spirit..." "Isaac Herzog, with me standing beside him..." "In Isaac Herzog I find genuine partnership for teamwork..." and so on.

Samia isn't formally running yet, hasn't gained a realistic spot on the party slate, hasn't been elected to the 21st Knesset, and already he's appointing himself No. 2 – or better yet, a partner, half of a two-headed leadership. Herzog, as an independent entity, is barely present in the online post. He should be thanking Samia not just for the support, but also for not completely erasing him from the picture.

Finance Minister and Kulanu chairman Moshe Kahlon also did his bit to help Herzog's campaign. In his speech at this week's Herzliya Conference, he referred to the possibility that the composition of the government could change in conjunction with a possible diplomatic initiative. Kahlon inserted in his speech – not in the smoothest way – a few lines seemingly tailored for the candidate, who is currently fighting the perception that he tried to crawl into the Netanyahu government in 2016 only to be hustled out the door in favor of Avigdor Lieberman and Yisrael Beiteinu.

"Herzog has proved himself a man of principle. He stood firm in his coalition negotiations with Netanyahu. It's not easy to say no when a shiny Mercedes and the Foreign Ministry are being dangled in front of you," said the finance minister.

At the campaign headquarters of Avi Gabbay, who's also running for Labor's top spot, Kahlon's comments were hard to take. Gabbay was one of the founders of Kulanu and was appointed by Kahlon as environment minister. He quit the government a year ago, saying he couldn't live with Lieberman's appointment as defense minister. Kahlon has not forgiven Gabbay for what he views as an act of betrayal.

The enemy of my enemy is my friend, goes the famous saying. If it's possible to lend a supportive shoulder, then why not? In this instance, Herzog really is Kahlon's friend and Gabbay could become his full-fledged enemy – if he indeed wins the Labor leadership primary.