

Analysis: The new prime minister's to-do list

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The job that frontrunners Tzipi Livni and Binyamin Netanyahu are vying for has to be the most difficult, most pressurized job on the planet. Ahead of this country's fifth general elections in 10 years, one wonders what kind of person would actually want to be Israeli prime minister.

The person in that job carries on his or her shoulders the fate of a good part of the Jewish people - no more, no less. It's a job in which miscalculations, even honest, well-meaning ones, can lead to the loss of many lives. It means having to withstand huge pressures from abroad and relentless machinations and complaints from within. It means trying to rule unruly Jews - something that even tested the patience of Moses.

But this is the job you want, Mrs. Livni. This is the role you covet, Mr. Netanyahu.

So here is a to-do list of what you are going to have to face when you wake up Wednesday morning. Note: This is a preliminary list and does not factor in all the surprising twists and turns you can expect to face until the next scheduled elections in October 2013 - that is, if your coalition makes it until then.

The first items on your to-do list all have to do with forming a coalition. This is not going to be easy, and you might not be able to get it done within the legal timeframe of 42 days. If you don't manage it, the president could give your competitor a shot at it for 28 days, so you should really attend to this action item with all seriousness.

Your potential partners on the religious Right will want you to promise to never even think about changing the religious status quo or raising the possibility of talking about dividing Jerusalem.

(Action item: figure out a way to avoid a head-on collision with US President Barack Obama's new Middle East team.)

They will also want you to hand over at least NIS 1 billion to the religious schools and restore child welfare benefits, without demanding any reforms (i.e. make the haredim get jobs or teach English and math).

While you may be willing to do all that, you would risk losing your potential partner on the secular Left (and with it the defense minister you most want by your side right now).

You'll want to keep the government small and not create too many new ministries, so that you won't make the financial crisis worse (see action items below) and open yourself up to criticism for wasting the public purse for political goals.

However, one of your chief coalition partners will demand an important cabinet post, but can only serve in a relatively minor ministry until his legal troubles are all cleared up.

This means you might have to revive the Strategic Affairs Ministry (although this would also put you in direct opposition with the defense minister you most want at your side right now) or create another important-sounding ministry with no real purpose and waste more money.

This important coalition partner will also probably want you to approve a draft for an oath of loyalty to the state, to be sworn at the Interior Ministry upon issuance of an ID document or passport. Your action item here is to balance that request with the need to keep a delicate peace between the Arabs and Jews in this country.

To get the best shot at forming a stable coalition, you will need to be liberal in handing out ministerial portfolios while keeping your coalition guidelines vague, with plenty of voting freedom for your partners' pet projects. You'll find it hard to take money from the defense budget to pay for all your other coalition promises, which will put you

on a collision course with the defense minister you most want by your side right now. And you won't want to increase government expenditure; see the next item on your to-do list.

Assuming you've successfully ticked off those items, you can enter the Prime Minister's Office, where you will face the following to-do list:

Pass the budget and cope with the worsening economic crisis

Whatever coalition you might have cobbled together is going to face its very first test early on (see above on money for the ultra-Orthodox). Any money you promise to construct houses, roads and infrastructure beyond the Green Line will also shake up your coalition, unless you partner up only with right-wing parties.

What definitely won't help now is the new, glitzy NIS 650 million prime minister's residence approved by the outgoing cabinet on Sunday. You really should put that money to better use. There is an expected slowdown in tax receipts, and thus government revenues. Add that to the cost of the multi-billion-shekel economic stimulus package you'll need to approve, and you can see that the new "Israeli White House" just doesn't make sense right now.

You really need to work out a full-scale economic plan. The economy is likely to contract in 2009 after several years of strong growth. Much of the crisis was caused far away and its solution could be out of your hands, so the best you can try do is to keep the economy as steady as you can, not spending too much, while trying to create jobs.

Deal with Iran, Hizbullah and Syria

You'll need to keep an eye on vengeful Hizbullah, which wants to perpetrate a terrorist spectacular very soon, either in Israel or against Jewish targets abroad.

You'll need to keep an eye on Syria, which already tried once to build a nuclear weapons program and may want to do it again, this time with more discretion.

Above all, your most pressing action item is to keep your eyes firmly focused on the spinning wheels of Iran's nuclear program. If the world takes too much time to act, either through tough sanctions or military blockades, you'll have to decide whether to send the IDF on one of its most challenging missions and prepare Israelis for a period of extreme turbulence and uncertainty - or alternatively, prepare the Jewish state to accept life with an Iranian bomb.

Deal, or not deal, with Hamas in Gaza

You're going to inherit a very vague and shaky 18-month cease-fire deal with Hamas in Gaza that could be broken any time Iran wants it to be. Within that time you're going to need to decide on one of two options: either you stop the growth of an Iranian-backed terrorist state on your southern border, or you let it grow and deal with it at a later stage. Hamas is going to bend somewhat on the three Quartet conditions, but just enough to get the international legitimacy it seeks to open the border crossings for all sorts of goods that will allow it to cement its rule there.

If you decide to take Hamas down, you'll need to send in the army again and this time finish the job, with all that entails. If you decide to leave Hamas where it is, you'll have to deal with them again at a later stage, when they're much stronger.

Free Gilad Schalit

Hopefully, by the time you actually take office, Gilad will be home. But in case he isn't, you'll eventually have to release hundreds of Palestinian prisoners, including some pretty repugnant ones with a lot of blood on their hands, to get the young soldier back. The pressure will always be on and the price will only rise.

Deal with the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank

You'll be visited shortly by Obama's Middle East envoy George Mitchell, who will want to move you along a peace track with the Palestinians. You're probably not going to be willing or able to do that right now, especially as the shaky coalition you've managed to scrape together will not allow you to move too far in any direction.

You will be either unwilling or unable to divide Jerusalem, or agree on West Bank borders, or allow an internationally-accepted formula for the refugee problem.

So the best you can do is try to keep a semblance of progress with the PA while continuing to encourage the growth of the PA economy... while keeping Mitchell off your back until the soft-spoken diplomat starts becoming really annoying by pushing for a two-state solution, at which stage you'll have to decide what kind of relationship you want with America.

In the meantime, you're also going to need to keep the IDF in the major West Bank cities to help the PA stay alive under the constant threat of growing Hamas popularity.

The longer the PA does not deliver a Palestinian state, the more its legitimacy in the eyes of the Palestinians erodes, and the more popular Hamas becomes. In short, your action item is to stop the West Bank from becoming Hamastan.

Further down your list: Keep your eye on increasing anti-Semitism in the world, and concurrent deligitimization of Israel as a Jewish homeland. Many of your ministers and top army officers cannot travel to certain countries, so you will need to help them.

The International Criminal Court in the Hague is cooking up some human rights lawsuits, too, so keep an eye on that. There is a growing grass-root boycott movement reaching from Belgium, America to South Africa, and includes trade, culture and economics. To fight back against all that you may want to expand the Anti-Semitism Forum in your office to include more than just two people.

There are many classrooms in the South that are not secured against rocket attacks; there is a shortage of classrooms, and there is always a teacher strike around the corner.

The brain drain is continuing apace, and Israel's schoolchildren are still slipping in the international rankings. The country is also running out of water, fast.

So, best of luck, Mr. or Mrs. Prime Minister.

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