The settlers will rise in power in Israel's new government

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U.S. Ambassador Dan Shapiro probably sat down Wednesday to write a long cable to the White House ahead of U.S. President Barack Obama's visit to report on the new government in Israel. Aside from noting the obvious fact that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is even weaker and has become the political hostage of all of his coalition partners, Shapiro probably emphasized the dramatic rise in the power of the settlers in Netanyahu's third government.

Netanyahu in his weakness, and Yesh Atid's Yair Lapid in his ignorance and callousness, have let the cat guard the cream. The money and the resources that Lapid has fought to take from the yeshivas will go directly or indirectly to build more and more settlements. Lapid's middle-class voters who live within the 1967 borders will continue to ask where the money has gone.

The government has not yet been finally constituted, but it seems that most of the key positions will be filled by settlers and their supporters. We may assume that as housing minister, Uri Ariel will devote a good deal of his time to expanding the settlements in the West Bank and advancing tenders and building in the Jewish neighborhoods of East Jerusalem. He will certainly say that construction in the settlements will contribute to supply and to lower housing prices.
The probable new defense minister, Moshe Ya’alon, is considered among the settlers’ favorite figures in Likud. The defense minister is key to construction in the settlements, opening and closing the faucet as he pleases. Ya’alon, who attacked his predecessor Ehud Barak for dragging his feet in approving construction in the settlements, and for thwarting the legalizing of illegal outposts, intends to change the policy.

As opposed to the last four years, settler leaders will have an open door to the defense minister’s office. They will find one of their own in the next office, too, that of the deputy defense minister. MK Ze’ev Elkin, a settler himself, is slated for that job, and will be in charge of the whole matter of settlements.

The list goes on – as industry, trade and labor minister, Naftali Bennett can redraw the map of national priorities and give government benefits to more settlements. Wearing the hat of public diplomacy minister, Bennett will try to persuade the world that there is no Palestinian people and the settlements are actually legal.

His party colleagues Nissan Slomiansky and Ayelet Shaked on the Knesset Finance Committee will see to the cash-flow; Uzi Landau in the tourism minister will open bed-and-breakfasts in Yitzhar and will launch an international campaign to bring evangelical tourists to Tapuah and Bat-Ayin. The Jerusalem affairs minister, Uri Orbach, will get an empty portfolio, but he will certainly think of a way to help the Elad association.

There are practically no checks and balances on the other side. Lapid does not consider the settlements a problem; in his election campaign he opposed a construction freeze. He will not be the one who stops the increase in funding to the settlements secretly started by his predecessor, Finance Minister Yuval Steinitz. Hatnuah chairwoman MK Tzipi Livni will not stand in the breach alone. Livni, who has been put in charge of negotiating with the Palestinians, will have plenty of free time to deal with the over-burdened and slow-moving courts, as future justice minister.

Netanyahu, who cooked up this broth, will now have to eat it. Netanyahu, who is also holding the Foreign Ministry portfolio, is aware of Israel’s difficult international situation. His close advisers have warned him of the damage the settlements are causing Israel and support freezing them, even if only partially. If he does not show leadership and responsibility, the settlement government that was forced on Netanyahu will become the government of isolation.

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