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Avi Gabbay: the "Israeli Macron"

A relative unknown gives fresh hope to Israel's moribund Labour Party

The new leader of Israel's Labour Party, Avi Gabbay, has caused quite a stir in the international press since his rise from relative political obscurity last month. With his determination to capture the "anti-establishment" vote, and early forays into the political centre, Gabbay has garnered comparisons with both Tony Blair and Emmanuel Macron. Labour Party member and former Party advisor Mickey Drill tells <link about writers-and-contributors writer hannes-alpen-1>Hannes Alpen the leader is helping Labour shed its stuffy image.

Israel's Labour party (HaAvoda) has a new leader, Avi Gabbay. As a former minister, multi-millionaire and outsider, the Western media has been quick to draw comparisons with Emmanuel Macron. But do these comparisons hold up?

> There are definite similarities. Both come from backgrounds outside politics, which has given them a clean image. Both resigned their ministerial posts in protest at government policies. Both present themselves as being anti-establishment. Both speak the innocuous language of the younger generation – terms like "left-wing" and "right-wing" are out, "sustainability" and "self-fulfilment" are in. Both men also have a modern brand of charisma: people have had enough of extroverts and flashy oratory. Instead they want quiet, thoughtful politicians who address people's individual needs.
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> But there is one important difference between the two. Whereas Macron founded a new movement, Gabbay has assumed the leadership of the long-established Labour party. The party and its predecessor, the workers' party Mapai, were Israel's dominant political force from the country's founding until 1977. But those glory days are long gone. Although Labour is currently the second-largest party in the Knesset, polls from May show it sliding to fourth place. And on top of that, the party is also riven by internal divisions.

Will the party be able to achieve long-term recovery under his

leadership and mount an effective challenge to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu?

It's hard to say. Gabbay has put forward a clear strategy. The first order of business is to reunite the party. His next priority will be to win back supporters from the opposition centrist party Yesh Atid, led by the charismatic Yair Lapid. The bulk of Yesh Atid's support comes from disillusioned Labour voters: young, liberal, progressive, secular Israelis who have had enough of the Netanyahu government's right-wing populism. Many of them see the Labour party as elitist and ossified, and will no longer consider voting for it. So they're turning instead to the "boutique party" Yesh Atid, which until Gabbay's election was neck-and-neck with Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party in every poll.

It's important to understand that although Israeli politics has lurched clearly to the right, the country's two political blocs are almost evenly matched: there've been changes in the distribution of seats within the blocs, but not between them. Despite this, Gabbay is also hoping to win over moderate conservative voters who reject the government's brand of right-wing populism. His goal is to double the party's membership to 100,000 in the coming months. But he believes he first needs to rebuild the party's appeal to ordinary Israelis and offer clear alternatives to the government's policies. The aim is to form a new government under Gabbay's leadership by autumn 2019 at the latest.

The fact that Gabbay is a Mizrahi, a Jew of middle-eastern ancestry, is another factor that could help him win over new voter segments, especially ones that for generations have seen the Labour party as an arrogant representative of the "European elite". People from these groups might be persuaded to vote Labour for the first time thanks to Gabbay's Moroccan heritage and his humble origins. Initial indications are undeniably positive. Polls carried out the day after Gabbay's election showed the Labour party gaining ground at the expense of Yesh Atid and the governing Likud party. If Knesset elections were held today, Labour would get 20 seats, Yesh Atid 18 and Likud 25. By contrast, a poll conducted in late May gave Labour just 12 seats, with Yesh Atid on 22 and Likud on 30.

Gabbay supports a two-state solution based on pre-1967 borders and land swaps, and has called for a united Jerusalem, possibly with Arab neighbourhoods under Palestinian sovereignty.

Will he have the party behind him?

Unfortunately, the party has a longstanding self-destructive streak. Gabbay is the ninth leader in 20 years. Whenever the party fails to

win the premiership at an election, its members throw out the leader. Even Isaac Herzog, who saw the party gain seats under his leadership at the last election, was given the boot. The 24 members of the party's parliamentary alliance are doing some great work, but sometimes they seem to be working against rather than with each other. One reason for this is the system of primaries, which forces candidates to curry favour with party members before each election in order to get a good place on the party list.

Gabbay wants to do away with internal squabbles and unite the divided party behind him. The party's parliamentary representatives have all pledged their unqualified support, and Gabbay has reached out to his predecessor, Herzog, by offering him the chance to continue in his role as leader of the opposition. Herzog has agreed. Due to the constitutional requirement that this key political role can only be held by a member of the Knesset, the positions of party leader and leader of the opposition will now be split between two people for the first time. Time will tell whether this arrangement will help or hinder party unity.

So what specific policies does the new leader support? And how likely is he to achieve success on these fronts?

These are the big questions to which there are not yet any answers. At present, Gabbay appears to support the existing party line. He favours a two-state solution based on pre-1967 borders and land swaps, has called for a united Jerusalem, possibly with Arab neighbourhoods under Palestinian sovereignty, and he's against talks with Hamas. He supports moderate, business-friendly social and economic policies as well as a stronger separation of religion and state. And he presents himself as a mediator and unifying figure in Israel's divided society.

One thing at least is clear: the new leader has ruled out his party joining Netanyahu's existing governing coalition.



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