



Avi Gabay, Israel's new Environmental Protection Minister

It's hardly news that Benjamin Netanyahu's new government is the most right-wing in the country's history, stoking dismay in the White House and in the international community. But this hardly implies a lack of environmental concern. Tzachi Hanegbi, Ariel Sharon's Environmental Protection Minister and a Likud hard-liner, did a professional and highly competent job in the post. For many years, one of the Knesset's leading environmentalists was Uzi Landau, a Likudnik who left the party for the even more right-wing Yisrael Beiteinu ("Israel is Our Home") Party because he thought Netanyahu had gone soft.

Recent news out of Jerusalem, however, could provide a source of further disquiet — this on top of everything else the government plans. The new Environmental Protection Minister, Avi Gabay, not only has no environmental background but is not even a member of the Knesset. The latter is perfectly legal but hardly speaks well to the environment's political heft in the coalition. What's going on?

Gabay is one of the founders of the Kulanu ("All of us") Party, headed by former Likud politician Moshe Kahlon. Kulanu ran on a platform of helping Israel's working people, now struggling in a society that trails only the United States among OECD countries in the degree of economic inequality. Kahlon, who grew up an impoverished household of Libyan immigrants, made his political mark through radical reform of Bezeq, Israel's rightfully-maligned telecommunications monopoly. Gabay was Bezeq's executive director during the reform period. But what does this mean for the environment?

I put this question to Amit Bracha, executive director of the [Israel Union for Environmental Defense](#), the nation's leading environmental organization, on whose American supporting board I serve (think of IUED as the Natural Resources Defense Council in Hebrew). Amit reported:

Gabay is a close friend of Kahlon and one of the founders of his Kulanu party. As you may know, Kahlon's ticket to office was his commitment to solve Israel's housing shortage. In order to fulfill this commitment, Kahlon demanded control of all of the planning and construction bodies, including the Finance, Housing and Environment Ministries, as well as the Israel Land Authority and Planning Administration, which were transferred from the Housing and Interior Ministries respectively. While we are in favor of affordable housing solutions, we are worried that Kulanu wants the Environmental Ministry under their watch in order to neutralize environmental opposition and remove any environmental protections standing in the way of their housing reforms.

It makes sense to unify these ministries in order to have the requisite policy authority and the ability to achieve policy coordination. And it is also good news that Kulanu, perhaps the most moderate of the parties in the coalition, has control over Housing, which has some authority over settlement-building in the West Bank. But will environmental considerations be ignored? Early signs are not good, as [the Environment Ministry was left out of the original coordinating body for planning](#). Given the relative weakness of the ministry to begin, that's particularly disappointing news.



Israel Union for Environmental Defense Israel can build more housing without subverting environmental concerns by building in the right places, either closer to transportation junctions or away from environmentally sensitive areas. That was the tactic taken by California with SB 375, and although Israeli conditions are far different, overall smart-growth principles remain available.

Amit is meeting with Gabay later this week to get clarification on the government's plans, and I will report on what he finds. If the coalition really wants to bypass Israeli environmental laws, IUED will be there before the nation's High Court to stop them. No one knows those laws better than it does because it had a hand in drafting them. Moreover, since the government has such a slim Knesset majority — 61 out of 120 Knesset seats — it will be easy to generate substantial political opposition to egregious plans, and it will require only one defection to defeat bad government legislation. But hopefully it won't come to that: the country's fragile environment, and endemic water shortage, means that ideology need not present obstacles to sensible and constructive policy-making. That's something of a miracle in the Middle East, which has seen its share of them.