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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, seen at left last month, on Thursday invited opposition leader Tzipi Livni, right, head of the Kadima party, to join his coalition government. The two leaders will meet on Sunday to discuss the offer, though Livni, seen Tuesday in the wings of Israel's parliament, has called it an effort to weaken her party.

## Livni, Netanyahu to Discuss Teaming Up

BY JOSHUA MITNICK

JERUSALEM—Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and opposition leader Tzipi Livni agreed to meet Sunday to discuss a surprise invitation by Mr. Netanyahu to join his government, capping a week of turmoil inside Ms. Livni's Kadima party.

Mr. Netanyahu asked Ms. Livni on Thursday to join his coalition government, saying threats to Israel's security from countries like Iran require unity.

Ms. Livni didn't immediately reject the offer. But at a stormy Kadima party meeting, she disparaged it as an attempt by Mr. Netanyahu to weaken the opposition. A spokesman for Ms. Livni said Friday that she didn't consider the initial offer—which included no cabinet posts with governing power—serious.

Ms. Livni nonetheless said at the party meeting she is willing to hear out Mr. Netanyahu to see whether there is a real possibility for a partnership.

Mr. Netanyahu has moderated some views on Palestinian policy that helped put him and a group of right-leaning parties into government earlier this year, when he outmaneuvered Ms. Livni by forming a ruling coalition though her party won the most parliament seats.

He has since moved closer to Ms. Livni's position by accepting a two-state solution with the Palestinians and a partial freeze on settlement building in the West Bank—though not the total freeze Palestinian leaders seek as a precursor to talks. The shifts have enabled him to broaden his appeal and limited Ms. Livni's ability to differentiate herself.

"There is no serious debate over [Palestinian] policy today," said Yossi Klein Halevi, a fellow at the Adelson Institute for Strategic Studies in Jerusalem. "So, Livni finds herself redundant."

In an interview with *The Wall Street Journal* two days before the new offer, Ms. Livni said she prefers being in the opposition

to serving as a dovish "fig leaf" in the government. She applauded Mr. Netanyahu's shift on Palestinian statehood, but complained his ultimate strategy for negotiations is too vague—while noting she got into politics to solve the conflict.

"I cannot be part of a never-ending process," she said. "If everybody is there [in the government], and nothing happens, then what? There's no chance for peace." But she added that she's ready to "hold the hand" of any Israeli leader ready to make politically sensitive concessions.

For Mr. Netanyahu, the support of Ms. Livni and Kadima could make the difference in any real push to cement a deal with the Palestinians. That support could help keep the Likud coalition together should right-wing members reject peace moves.

Ms. Livni declined Mr. Netanyahu's first offer to combine forces after the February election, and her popularity has suffered while his has risen.

Recent unrest within the Kadima party has made Ms. Livni particularly vulnerable. Earlier this week, one parliament member left Kadima, saying he lost confidence in Ms. Livni. Likud members approached other members this week with offers to defect.

The turmoil was clear Thursday evening at a prescheduled Kadima party meeting just hours after Mr. Netanyahu's offer. "I am not willing to be in the opposition at any price," said Kadima parliament member Ronit Tirosh. "If the prime minister implements the platform of Kadima, we need to be there" in the government.

Within the party's falling fortunes, "People are bitter at her" for not joining the Likud coalition government initially, passing up cabinet posts offered then, said Avraham Diskin, a Hebrew University political science professor. "She could have had half the kingdom."

Ms. Livni's parents were part

of a militia led by Likud founder Menachem Begin and she entered Likud politics when Mr. Netanyahu was party leader in the 1990s. But she helped former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon lead a revolt that formed Kadima when Likud colleagues opposed Israel's military withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005. She became prime minister in 2008 but was forced to call new elections.

Ms. Livni fared poorly in job-performance ratings compared with Mr. Netanyahu and other government ministers, in a poll last week by Israel public radio. If the downward trend continues, she may face a challenge for the Kadima party leadership.

But her unease over joining Mr. Netanyahu remains palpable. In the middle of her address to party members Thursday, when Ms. Livni mistakenly referred to herself as having served as his foreign minister, colleagues shouted out to correct her. Taken aback, Ms. Livni blurted out, "God forbid."