



Fathoming the Israeli Elections 2019

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INTRODUCTION

This pamphlet brings together the analyses of the 2019 Israeli election carried by *Fathom* journal.

In Part 1: Fathoming the 2019 Election, veteran Israeli commentator **Nahum Barnea** argues that the main issue of the elections is neither social issues nor national security challenges but rather whether Benjamin Netanyahu should continue to serve as Prime Minister. Barnea also suggests that while the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not yet front and centre of the campaign, the expected announcement of Trump's peace plan will turn the topic into a major issue as coalition negotiations are taking place. Public opinion expert **Dahlia Scheindlin** discusses how the Israeli public defines itself and argues that the key to the centre-left winning the elections will be convincing members of the Moderate Right to switch blocs.

Two writers discuss the future of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. **Anshel Pfeffer**, author of *The Turbulent Life and Times of Benjamin Netanyahu*, believes that the elections are primarily a referendum on the Likud leader, and argues that a post-Netanyahu era – which will either happen following the elections or due to the prime minister's legal difficulties – will allow the Israeli political system to renew itself. **Doron Matza** writes that regardless of Netanyahu's personal future, his broadly pragmatic diplomatic, security and economic policies – rather than his sometimes aggressive rhetoric – enjoy a wide ideological consensus within Israeli society, and that regardless of who wins the election, these policies are likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

Shany Mor evaluates Israel's much maligned electoral system, arguing that the case against Israel's very proportional system of parliamentary representation remains empirically weak, and that the demand for its reform continues to parallel frustrations with political facts of life that have nothing to do with constitutional provisions.

Paul Gross claims that the most fundamental difference between the main parties is neither national security nor economic policy but rather starkly contrasting visions for the State of Israel: either the liberal democracy envisaged by Zi-

onists from Theodore Herzl, David Ben-Gurion and Ze'ev Jabotinsky embodied in the Declaration of Independence; or the illiberal nationalism represented by the loudest promoters of the Nation-State Law.

Two essays discuss the elections through the prism of the lack of debate over National Security issues. **Jonathan Spyer** argues that that a new consensus over national security issues is emerging in Israeli politics that stretches across the political spectrum, leading the main parties to focus on the different personalities, and not the different policies, of the parties. **Jonathan Rynhold** believes that the Palestinian issue is no longer central to elections but that the composition of the next coalition will play a major role in determining Israel's policy towards the Palestinians going forward, especially regarding changes to the reality on the ground in the West Bank and in the use of strengthening regional cooperation against Iran to make progress on the peace track.

In Part 2: Contesting the 2019 Election, **Ron Gerlitz** and **Joel Braunold** both argue for the necessity of the centre-left allying with the Arab parties in order to defeat the right. Gerlitz explains how only a political alliance between the Jewish left, the Jewish centre, and Arab citizens has a chance of preventing the Israeli right from continuing in power and that such an alliance is feasible. Braunold details how two-thirds of the Arab public want to see their representatives sitting in government, adding that if the Israeli Centre-Left is ever to return to power, it should too.

Eric Lee discusses why the Israeli Labor Party has failed to return to power for over 20 years, pointing to the failure of the Oslo Accords to make Israelis feel more secure, the inability of the party to convince working class people to vote left, and the decline of social democratic parties in Western Europe as a whole. **Eran Etzion** talks about why, in the age of the app, he has established a new political party, Yashar, and why he believes it can be the future of Israeli democracy.

Three authors tackle different aspects of the various right-wing parties, and the future of the West Bank. **Colin Shindler** details how pragmatism by a Right wing government has often led to an ideological schism towards the far Right, and evaluates the recent merger between Jewish Home, National Union and

Jewish Power that was ‘midwived’ by Prime Minister Netanyahu. Yisrael Me-dad explores why the fate of the territories has barely been mentioned in the campaign, suggesting that most Israeli Jews now support ‘the idea that Jews belong in Judea and Samaria and believe that all or most of them should stay’; And **Sara Hirschhorn** argues that while the national religious community face the 2019 election without a traditional ideological home, election results are likely to offer more political surety to the constituency than to any other.

Gilad Malach discusses voting trends within the ultra-Orthodox ‘sector’, how the onset of technology is affecting voting patterns, and the growing power of the ‘independent’ ultra-Orthodox voter.

Lastly, two essays discuss the ‘centre’ in Israel. **Pinchas Landau** believes that the emergence of the new centrist party ‘Blue and White’ as the main rival to Netanyahu’s Likud highlights the gulf between Israel and the (crumbling) democracies of the West. And **Toby Greene** argues that the merger between the Israel Resilience Party and Yesh Atid represents the third phase in Israeli centrism, which rather than the Palestinian issue or the economy, is focused on the very character of Israeli politics and the values of the state.

In the coming weeks, Fathom will also be publishing a conversation with **Ihab Kadah**, director of research in Arab society in Midgam Consulting and Research, **Yossi Kuperwasser**, who maps out the priorities for the next government, and **David Makovsky** and **Dennis Ross** who discuss the much-awaited Trump Peace Plan.

We will also be publishing three voices of young activists – **Yair Zivan**, **Tal Harris** and **Rachel Broyde** – who explain which party they are voting for and why.



FATHOMING THE ISRAELI ELECTIONS: AN INTERVIEW WITH NAHUM BARNEA

NAHUM BARNEA

Nahum Barnea is a veteran Israeli commentator for Yediot Ahronoth who has covered Israeli domestic and foreign affairs for decades. In this discussion with Fathom – done days before the parties of Benny Gantz and Yair Lapid merged – Barnea argues that the main issue of the elections is neither social issues nor national security challenges but rather whether Benjamin Netanyahu should continue to serve as Prime Minister. He also details how even though the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not yet front and centre of the debate, the upcoming announcement of Trump's peace plan will turn the topic into a major issue as coalition negotiations are taking place.

Fathom: *How is the 2019 election similar or dissimilar from other elections? What are the main issues of the election?*

Nahum Barnea: It's only natural that each election campaign is different. The one interesting and unique feature in this election is that the main focus is not on policies – the economy, diplomacy, the international agenda, security etc – but first and foremost on one person, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and whether, after more than ten years in the position, a period longer than any other Prime Minister, he should continue. Netanyahu is not only the focus of the campaign among the opposition, but he is also running the Likud campaign as a personal campaign. This is particularly interesting as although Israelis vote for parties rather than individuals, the party is only marginal in the campaign.

Perhaps more important is the question of the Attorney General's (AG) decision over whether to indict Netanyahu pending a hearing. These are going to become central issues in the campaign, especially in the weeks before election day, when it will be clear to the voters whether the AG is going to indict Netanyahu for bribery. He is due to announce his decision during the last week of

February or the first week of March.

Fathom: *When the police recommended charging the prime minister, Likud actually rose in the polls. How much influence on the elections will the decision to indict have?*

NB: This could go either way. On the one hand, a lot of people who believe Netanyahu is a good, effective prime minister will reconsider voting for Likud because they feel that a corrupt prime minister – or one under indictment pending a hearing – is not the prime minister they want to have. In this scenario, the votes could either go to the right of Likud or to the left of it. Another option is that Netanyahu will turn the debate regarding the AG's announcement into a campaign of victimisation – with him playing the role of the victim, in a similar way to US President Donald Trump's campaign where he turned on the establishment.

The Israeli media have been very critical towards Netanyahu because of the legal accusations against him, but Netanyahu has the chance to become even stronger because there are those who believe that what has been done to him is unfair. Ultimately, we don't really know yet, but the indictment and the investigations will be a major debate in the last two or three weeks of the campaign.

Fathom: *You talked about the focus being on Netanyahu. To what extent do you think personality is now basically trumping policy?*

NB: This is increasingly true in Israel and due to two reasons. First, I believe most Israeli voters believe that the state of the country is basically satisfactory. The economy isn't booming, but it is much better than other countries. There is debate over social issues, but it is not a major issue in this election and people feel stable. Second, on the topics Israeli voters consider crucial – such as the security challenges vis-à-vis Iran, with Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in the north etc. – there is no substantive difference between the major parties on either side of the aisle. The right-wing government and the parties in the centre-left have mostly deferred on discussing these issues.

Fathom: *Many people imagine the classic debate in Israel to be between right and left, which is primarily determined by one's position on the Palestinian issue. One*

of the main slogans of Gantz's party, the Israeli Resilience party is, 'it's no longer about right or left'. To what extent do you think that is an accurate description of where the Israeli public is?

NB: I tend to believe that these issues have not been relevant to this campaign so far. The question of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is crucial to the future of Israel. But in recent years it became irrelevant because there was no progress and it seems there is little appetite on either side to move forward. At the same time, this issue can become a big one because of President Trump's much awaited 'Deal of the Century'. This will probably be published immediately after the Israeli elections. While parts of it have been revealed by the media in



UNDERSTANDING THE BLOCS

DAHLIA SCHEINDLIN

Dr. Dahlia Scheindlin is a public opinion expert who has advised five national campaigns in Israel and in 15 other countries; she is a founding writer on +972 Magazine, co-host of the Tel Aviv Review podcast and formerly an adjunct lecturer at Tel Aviv University. In this conversation with BICOM CEO James Sorene, Scheindlin discusses how the Israeli public defines itself and argues that the key to the centre-left winning the elections will be convincing members of the Moderate Right to switch blocs.

Viewing the public through the lens of the blocs

The way the Israeli people self-identify – as Right, Centre or Left – is still the best predictor in how people will vote in the elections. Yet when we talk about which party will win and what coalition they might form, the most important thing is to look at the blocs, namely Right, Left and Centre and to understand the numbers. When we ask people whether they consider themselves to be Firm Right, Moderate Right, Firm Left, Moderate Left, or Centrist, the responses are very consistent. The largest proportion of people – 45 per cent of the entirety of Israeli society rather than just those who vote – self-identify as right-wing (Firm Right and Moderate Right); about 25 to 28 per cent consider themselves Centrist; and about 20 per cent Left. When the Left and Centre are combined, for example, when those parties are together in the opposition which is what happened after the 2015 elections, there is almost parity between the blocs.

However, when you look at the breakdown among those who actually turn out to vote, the Arab community votes in significantly lower numbers (they account for roughly 10 per cent of the vote, despite comprising 20 per cent of the population). For this reason it is important to understand the ideological self-definition among Jewish voters, which changes the balance between the blocs.

The breakdown among Jews can reach up to 55 per cent for the Firm Right/Moderate Right, 25 to 30 per cent Centrist, and Left drops down to 15 per cent. And it is these numbers that were reflected in the last Knesset where there were 66 MKs from the Right versus 54 from the Opposition.

Until those numbers significantly change, it's very hard to see how there will be a change in the dynamics of the next coalition, even if the parties themselves reconfigure. Even when parties merge or reform, for the most part Israelis have a clear sense of which side of the bloc they belong to.

Trying to shift members of the moderate Right

There will not be a major change in the composition of the next government without a noticeable shift in Moderate Right voters to a different bloc. But this group is actually quite large. If you look at the 45 per cent who comprise the Total Right, its two components, the Firm Right and Moderate Right break down pretty evenly. This makes the Moderate Right approximately a quarter of the voting population, or approximately half of the Total Right.

There is a significant difference between the Firm Right and Moderate Right on most issues, such as their approach to the two state solution, religion and state, national identity issues. The question is, who out of those in the Moderate Right would consider a) shifting parties and also b) shifting across blocs.

Benny Gantz has reached out to those people by emphasising his security credentials and his actions in Gaza and he seems to think that will appeal to the Moderate Right. Whether it will or not is unclear, but he certainly understands that without that shifting between blocs there will not be a change of government.

The Bibi factor

Likud has generally been very stable. But Netanyahu is facing certain vulnerabilities, not just regarding the Attorney General's (AG) announcement. In terms of his political positioning, Netanyahu has had the exclusive territory of being 'Mr Security'. No matter how much people criticise him around the dinner table, the fact is that the right wing feels safer with Netanyahu. However, that

becomes less of an exclusive image when you are facing down three former Chiefs of Staff.

But how many people will this specific issue actually affect? One would have to be both sceptical of Netanyahu, annoyed at the corruption charges, tired of his populist leadership *and* voting solely based on security issues to turn to Gantz – a very small subsection of right-wing voters. Many on the Right who vote for Netanyahu don't just see him as Mr Security – they also see him as a states-person, a very savvy politician. The one arena left where Netanyahu has an exclusive and strong image in the eyes of the electorate is his foreign policy, statesmanship and ability to connect with the Americans (he even knows how to 'speak Trump'). While he is very reticent about discussing his endgame for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict he never fails to mention how important it is that he's opened up relations with Chad, or that he's close to Indian Prime Minister Modi, or that he holds meetings with Putin – even the fact he postponed his latest one and held it a week later, shows how confident he is on the international stage. People see Netanyahu as someone who can really manoeuvre the global situation. In this context it becomes harder to see people voting for him *exclusively* for the security image. That's why I don't have strong evidence for why people would leave Likud en masse when they've been so stalwart in supporting Netanyahu in surveys since the 2015 election.

The Attorney General's announcement has had no impact

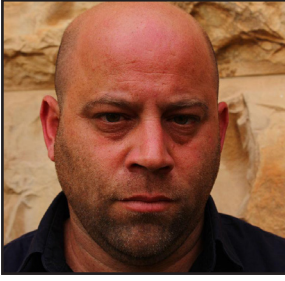
Based on previous evidence, I'm not convinced there will be a massive defection following the AG's decision. The only comparable situation is the police recommendation from February 2018 that Netanyahu be indicted in Case 1,000 and 2,000 after which Netanyahu's poll numbers rose. They were hovering between 25 to 28 seats, and then rose and stayed above 30 seats. It might have been the case that the more severe charge of bribery in Case 4,000 would have in impact. But most polls that have appeared since the AG announced his decision to indict the Prime Minister pending a hearing, show what was expected: overall stability for Likud. In other words, no discernible impact so far.

The Jewish Home / Jewish Power merger

The merger between Jewish Home and Jewish Power is an important story for

the Right. But I think most analysts are getting the merger wrong. People think it's interesting there is a consolidation on the right. But the fact is that we now have two parties (Jewish Home and New Right led by Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked) appealing mostly to a single constituency of national religious voters – this group had only one party as its main representative in 2015 (Jewish Home). So the right is somewhat divided.

Jewish Power is considered extreme even among the Israeli right. But the main issue is whether there are Likud voters or people on the Firm Right or Moderate Right who would have voted within the right-wing bloc in the elections but who will now will now 'defect' in order to try and prevent the possibility of having Michael Ben-Ari of Jewish Power as a Minister in the next government? That scenario is a possibility, but I'm not sure how common that attitude will be. It is more likely that some people on the Moderate Right may believe things have gone too far. These people are right-wing on security and national identity – and probably supported the Nation State Law – but are repulsed by what Jewish Power represents. Still it's not clear how many of them will leave the bloc for that reason.



‘WE ARE AT THE END OF THE NETANYAHU ERA’: A FATHOM FORUM WITH ANSHEL PFEFFER

ANSHEL PFEFFER

In this Fathom Forum, journalist and writer Anshel Pfeffer, author of The Turbulent Life and Times of Benjamin Netanyahu (2018) argues that the upcoming elections are primarily a referendum on the Likud leader, and believes that a post-Netanyahu era – which will either happen following the elections or due to the prime minister’s legal difficulties – will allow the Israeli political system to renew itself.

Israeli elections always have two stages: the stage until Election Day; and then the horse-trading and forming of coalitions afterwards. And in an unprecedented way, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has already won the second stage in the sense that he is first leader who has already formed his coalition in advance. Why? All the parties in the coalition – including the ultra-Orthodox, who normally observe a neutrality code and don’t express support for a prime minister – have already pledged their allegiance to Netanyahu in advance. And if the numbers add up after Election Day, then he has a coalition. And he has already said he wants to copy and paste his current coalition with in his next government. Those party leaders know that for their own voters it is imperative for them to show they’ll support him.

A referendum on Netanyahu

This is not an election about policy or ideology. Rather, it’s a referendum on whether Netanyahu will continue as prime minister. And if you’re not part of the Likud, or the recently merged Blue and White, then the only way you can define yourself is by either being for or against Netanyahu. The issue of ‘yes or no Netanyahu’ is so visceral that this is the only way parties are defining themselves. For example, New Right leader Naftali Bennett claims that only a strong New Right will keep Netanyahu true to the rightist path. And the ultra-Orthodox

parties, which historically would often adopt a wait and see policy, are coming out in support of Netanyahu. And it's the same with the opposition – Blue and White, Labor and Meretz are competing over who can convince voters they have a better chance of beating Netanyahu, or at a minimum not entering a coalition with him. The argument is not over solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or the economy, or social ideas. It's about who can get rid of Netanyahu.

Gantz, the accidental leader

I've known Benny Gantz for 15 years, and there is very little to say about him. As generals go, he's probably the most boring general I've interviewed – not necessarily in the bad sense. He's a good guy – no enemies, no taint of corruption, no discernible views either way. Yet, if anyone had asked members of Israeli military General Staff which of their colleagues would be most likely to become prime minister, none of them would've said Gantz, at least certainly before he became Chief of Staff, (and he only became Chief of Staff by accident as two people above him were tainted by scandal).

But the next prime minister of Israel is also likely going to be an accidental figure. Because Netanyahu has dominated politics for so long, there isn't a clear process of a successor. Neither Likud nor the opposition parties have been able to nurture a successor from within their ranks. The Labor Party has been hindered by a long series of leaders unable to say what Labor is about and what centre-Left politics should be about. Current leader Avi Gabbay is a newcomer primarily suffering from the failures of his predecessors.

The slow move of disgruntled Likud supporters

When Netanyahu falls, whoever replaces him will be the person fortunate enough to be there at the right time. And he's currently bringing himself down. The slow trend of soft-Right voters who are moving to Blue and White are Likud-niks at heart. But they are fed up with Netanyahu and are prepared to vote for the centrist party because they want to refresh Israel's leadership. Many people who generally vote Likud may not want that this time – although no one is saying it out loud, and whoever wields the sword against Netanyahu will not be the next leader. But there are enough disgruntled Likud voters willing to vote elsewhere, as demonstrated by the 10 seats Kulanu received last time out.

Towards the post-Netanyahu era

And Gantz happens to be the lucky beneficiary – but not because he’s the most suitable candidate after Netanyahu, and certainly not because Blue and White will exist as a party a few years from now. The natural cycle of centrist parties is normally two elections, and Blue and White have a poison pill clause that after two and a half years Gantz will make way for Lapid (for which there is no formal handover process within the Israeli political system and an orderly Gantz-Lapid transition is far from clear and may tear the party apart).

But Blue and White isn’t really a classic party in the sense of Labor or the Likud. It doesn’t have a central idea. Rather, it’s a project to replace Netanyahu. And the end of Netanyahu may also represent a cathartic moment in Israeli politics. It will allow the entire political system to renew itself, including Likud, which today is just a platform for Netanyahu. Labor and the rest of the parties on the political spectrum may finally be able to work out what they’re for.

The establishment of the Blue and White party is a moment that allows all of this to happen. Gantz is a newbie to politics and a blank slate – everyone wants to paint their aspirations on him. But he really is just a man who has perhaps come along at the right moment, and the fact he’s a general means he can challenge Netanyahu’s ‘Mr Security’ title.

We are at the end of the Netanyahu era – whether imminent, or a few months or year down the road – and Israeli politics will begin afresh and we can’t predict how that will look.



NETANYAHU ISN'T JUST ISRAEL'S PRIME MINISTER; HE REPRESENTS AN ISRAELI PARADIGM THAT IS HERE TO STAY

DORON MATZA

While some analysts believe Israel is approaching a 'post-Netanyahu era', Doron Matza argues that regardless of Netanyahu's personal future, his broadly pragmatic diplomatic, security and economic policies – rather than his sometimes aggressive rhetoric – enjoy a wide ideological consensus within Israeli society. In light of this, regardless of who wins the election, these policies are likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

All about the Benjamin?

Israel's 2019 elections have been focused on one thing and one thing only – Benjamin Netanyahu and his future. One even gets the impression that Israel has never had a campaign so focused on personality. The term 'political upset' [mahapach], first used to describe Likud's 1977 victory that brought it to power for the first time, is now being used to discuss the question of whether Netanyahu will continue to serve as prime minister or whether we're nearing the end of his decade-long reign.

Many believe that even if Netanyahu succeeds in forming the next coalition – as polls currently suggest – the question of his political future will remain on the public agenda due to the upcoming hearing and the possibility that the Attorney General will decide to indict him after a pre-trial hearing. In light of this, some analysts argue that regardless of the election results, we are already approaching a post-Netanyahu era.

I disagree. Israel currently enjoys a wide ideological consensus surrounding key issues on the state's political, economic and social agenda. This consensus is so widespread that it is hard to find any significant difference of approach between the main political forces competing in the elections. It is thus no surprise that most parties have focused their political campaigns on individual personal-

ities, accusations of Netanyahu's corruption, or the relative ability of Netanyahu to run the country compared to his main opponent, Benny Gantz.

A rejection of the utopian visions of the 90s

In some way, the consolidation of this consensus is a reaction against the experiment pushed by the Labor party and liberal elites in the mid-1990s. Yitzhak Rabin's government of 1992 tried to advance two dramatic processes simultaneously: the first was a utopian peace process, including not only peace between Israel and the Palestinians and Israel and its Arab neighbours based on land for peace but also the establishment of Shimon Peres' New Middle East. The second process was the attempt to turn Israeli society away from its cultural Jewish foundation into a liberal, cosmopolitan model, a society based on an abstract civic identity similar to those of Western European states. Both these attempts completely failed.

Since then, Israel has trodden the path of 'fixing' these policies and returning the equilibrium to an earlier pre-1990s period. And it is Netanyahu who has played a key role in establishing an alternative approach based on the idea which we can call the 'Middle Ground'.

The realist Middle Ground approach

At its core, this approach requires Israel to stop striving to achieve optimal goals and instead to advance a more realistic approach to policy making – both politically/strategically and socio-economically. Strategically, this has meant Israel moving away from the two-state paradigm and final-status agreements but also refraining from promoting the annexation of the West Bank or granting Israeli citizenship to Palestinians. In the socio-economic realm, it has involved the adoption of a neo-liberal approach while also trying to soften its flaws, especially since the summer 2011 social protests.

This Middle Ground concept has achieved a number of successes. Israel has maintained relative security and stability in the West Bank, carrying out security and economic cooperation with the Palestinian Authority (while both sides simultaneously battle one another in the international-diplomatic arena); Israel has fought Hamas but without pushing to reoccupy Gaza and topple it; without

attacking Iran directly, Israel has tried to curb that country's nuclear project and been active in Syria to prevent the Islamic Republic turning Syria into a forward base; Israel has also managed to revolutionise its relations with the Arab world, and has even somewhat unknotted the connection between regional normalisation and peace with the Palestinians. Meanwhile, Israel's economic pragmatism has allowed it to ride out the financial crash, establish its status as a high-tech superpower, and provide its citizens with a good quality of life.

The historical roots of the Middle Ground approach

While this unsentimental conceptual framework converged with a sobering process within Israeli society following the utopian and optimistic visions from the 1990s, it actually has deep historical roots. To a large extent, this realist approach was based on the principles established by David Ben-Gurion and the early leaders of the Labor party. According to this logic, Netanyahu's premiership over the last decade – excluding his specific style, rhetoric and ethos – actually represents a form of returning Zionism to its ideological and historical sources. Yet even though Netanyahu has followed Ben-Gurion's path by adapting realistic and pragmatic approach, he has done so while advancing revisionist rhetoric, which has created a gap between considered and careful policies on the one hand, and the aggressive and sharp discourse completely at odds with traditional Israeli leadership on the other.

One example of this tension between belligerent discourse and careful policy can be found in Gaza. On the one hand, the government makes aggressive declarations towards Hamas. Yet at the same time it has been hesitant to initiate rounds of conflict and prefers arrangements with Hamas via Egypt and Qatar.

Another example of this gap between discourse and policy can be found in the Nation State Basic Law. The Law didn't change anything significant in terms of the reality. It kept the definition of the identity of the State of Israel and maintained the principles that give the collective right of the Jewish people preference in designing the national agenda, determining the character of the public sphere, and deciding on the division of state resources. Moreover, Netanyahu's government has spent billions of dollars in advancing one of the largest ever plans to help the Arab sector and aid its integration into the national economy. But by formalising this reality through legislation, Netanyahu took the sensitive

issue of Jewish-Arab relations and brought it onto the public agenda in an aggressive way.

Despite the tension between aggressive discourse and carefully considered policy, Netanyahu has succeeded in gaining the trust of the Israeli public, to the extent that it has seemingly rejected the arguments Netanyahu's opponents make focusing on corruption and instead drawing a distinction between corruption investigations and the way in Netanyahu manages the affairs of the country.

The Middle Ground approach becomes political consensus

Netanyahu's approach hasn't just become accepted within the Israeli public but has also taken hold within the political system. The establishment of 'Blue and White,' headed by three former Chiefs of Staff, reflects both the expansion of this realist paradigm and its turning into the political centre of gravity within Israeli society and politics.

Anyone who reads Blue and White's manifesto will notice the similarities with the positions of Netanyahu in almost every area – especially in major diplomatic and economic issues. Even in the major round of interviews given by Gantz, he presented centrist, realist positions. Gantz was at pains not to oppose the word 'peace' but also warned in the same breath against the possibility of reaching an agreement with the Palestinians based on the Clinton Parameters and the principle of two states for two peoples. Within Blue and White's list, one notices a distancing from the ideological idea that defined Israel during the 1990s. Yair Lapid, head of Yesh Atid (one of the party's main components) previously sat in Netanyahu's cabinet, served as Finance Minister and formed a political alliance with then head of Jewish home, Naftali Bennett, who represents the national religious community and settlers in the West Bank. Other individuals on the list – such as former Cabinet Secretary Tzvi Hauser – are identified ideologically and politically with Likud.

In many senses, despite election soundbites that try to blur the truth, this election campaign is hiding these trends towards the ideological convergence within the political system. Blue and White is playing in the same ideological field as Likud apart from two main differences that have turned into the main

arguments for the elections. The first – argued by Blue and White – relates to the style of Netanyahu towards different sectors within Israeli society and as regards corruption. The second – which is argued by Likud – is the operational difference between those such as Netanyahu who have been governing for 10 years versus everyone else.

In any event, the ideological similarity between the two main parties indicates the process of ideological hegemony within the State of Israel based on a realist-sober (some would say cynical) approach, which tends to prefer the middle ground over absolute approaches. And during the last decade, Netanyahu has not only identified the direction of the trend but has also successfully and skillfully utilised it to further the state's national interests.

The current political noise in the election cycle testifies to the presence of this ideological paradigm and its strength. Regardless of the results, there won't be any ideological upset, which is why the word mahapach is being used solely to refer to Netanyahu losing the premiership. Even if such a thing were to happen, Netanyahu's policies – rather than his rhetoric – have already won out in this election cycle and he has bequeathed the principles of his approach that will define the policies of the next government.



THE ACCIDENTAL WISDOM OF ISRAEL'S MALIGNED POLITICAL SYSTEM REVISITED

SHANY MOR

In late 2013 Shany Mor was commissioned to write an article about Israel's much-criticised proportional electoral system for the very first issue of Fathom. The result was 'The Accidental Wisdom of Israel's Maligned Electoral System', a robust defence of the status quo that was much commented on. Six years and two general elections later, and with another looming, the editors asked Mor to revisit his essay. He argues below that the case against Israel's very proportional system of parliamentary representation is as empirically weak now as it was then, and that the demand for its reform continues to parallel frustrations with political facts of life that have nothing to do with constitutional provisions.

The Israeli electoral system has never wanted for critics nor for well-intentioned reformers, yet its basic contours have remained remarkably unchanged since the first general election in 1949. Unchanged and unloved, it is also vastly underappreciated. Its quirks and supposed deficiencies, by historical accident rather than design perhaps, have made an enormous contribution to Israeli political stability and to the normalisation of democracy in a society that by any comparative reckoning should never have had it so good.

Naysayers, particularly from the English-speaking world, have accused Israel's proportional representation system of breeding constant instability and empowering fringe elements and extremists, while an undercurrent of domestic discourse pines for 'strong leadership' that isn't always looking over its shoulders to please coalition partners.

Mythical Vices

When I first wrote this article, it was a matter of nearly universal consensus among critics that the electoral threshold for the Knesset is simply too low. It stood then at 2 per cent, having been raised twice already (from 1 per cent

and 1.5 per cent). If we were to judge by the indignation this supposedly low threshold inspired, we might expect to see a Knesset with lots of tiny parties just squeaking past the 2 per cent with only two seats. In fact, parties entering the Knesset near the threshold are extremely rare (in the last four elections, only one — Kadima in 2013 — did).

Nor is Israel's low threshold particularly unique. A threshold of 4 per cent or 5 per cent is common in many democracies, but of those, some, like Poland and Romania, make exceptions for national-ethnic minorities, and others, like Germany or New Zealand, don't apply the threshold to parties which win direct mandates in regional districts. Mature democracies in Finland and the Netherlands, among others, do just fine with no threshold. Only Turkey imposes a high 10 per cent threshold.

Raising the threshold to 3.25 per cent, as happened by law in 2014, has had almost no appreciable effect on the makeup of Parliament. The number of parties has not changed. Three previously separate Arab lists combined into one aptly named Joint List in the most recent election in 2015, but they have split again into two lists for the upcoming 2019 election.

To be sure, there are quite a few parties in the Knesset, though the number is far from extraordinary when compared to some European parliaments. Even the UK, the most radically anti-proportional parliament in Europe, returned ten parties after the most recent general election (and, lest anyone think that was a fluke, eleven in the one before that). In Israel, the number of parties returned at each recent election has held steady at around twelve, and this number, believe it or not, is an accurate reflection of the existing political cleavages in Israel's very diverse and deeply divided political society. Israel's real 'problem' is not the proliferation of tiny parties but the growth of medium-sized parties and, in the last two decades, the decline of large ones. In all of Israel's first thirteen general elections (out of eighteen so far), at least one party was returned to Parliament with 40 or more seats (out of 120). In the Seventh and Eighth Knessets, one party even exceeded 50, and in the Tenth and Eleventh, two parties topped 40. Since 1996, no party has come even close, and three of the last four Knessets have been elected without any party even crossing 30 seats. Is this because of inroads made by small parties creeping across a low threshold? Not at all. In fact, at the peak performance of the two large parties in the 1980s,

there were more parties in the Knesset than today (15 rather than 12).

Election results for the Knesset have evolved in three distinct, identifiable phases. The first eight elections (1949-1973) returned Knessets with one large party and its satellites and opponents. The next five (1977-1992) gave us two large parties and ten or more small ones. And the most recent five (1996-2009) have left us with a smattering of medium-sized parties. The action, as it were, has simply not been anywhere near the threshold.

The ethnic, religious, and ideological cleavages in Israeli politics are more or less faithfully represented by the existing parties. Raising the threshold much higher than it is today won't push out the cranks. It will, rather, leave entire constituencies unrepresented by their own parties, with no real leverage over larger parties to broaden their bases either. Do we really want to see a consolidated Arab bloc pandering only to its Islamist element? A joint ultra-Orthodox list with no issue binding it but draft-dodging and welfare entitlement? These would be the comparatively optimistic scenarios with a higher threshold. The more likely outcome would be a complete exit from democratic politics by precisely those groups whose connection to the state's 'rules of the game' is already tenuous at best.

The kinds of parties ordinarily believed to be swatted away by higher thresholds exist more in people's imaginations or exaggerated memories than in the actual Knessets of recent years. Single-issue parties rarely cross the threshold and never survive more than one Knesset anyway. The vanity list, a faction built around a notable figure and one or two hangers-on, has largely disappeared from the Israeli electoral scene. These parties were almost always led by prickly former generals who were either frustrated and bewildered by their less than meteoric rise to the top of an established party or who left an established party in a huff over some principle which no one can remember a week or two after the dramatic split. In the original article leading up to the 2013 election, I predicted that the one extant vanity list (a result of Ehud Barak's split of the Labor party) of the time wouldn't make it into the next Knesset, and indeed it did not.

Of course, the scourge of tiny parties isn't the only thing critics of Israel's proportional representation find fault with. We are commonly told that it is nearly

impossible to put together a coherent government here, though in fact every election — even the most seemingly indecisive ones (1984, 2009) — has led to a government being formed within the allotted 45 days. This is in stark contrast to situations that routinely emerge in Belgium where months pass between an election and a coalition. Britain had to go to the polls twice in 1974 to get a manageable governing majority.

Minority governments, too, have been a rarity in Israel, though they are currently in power in both Denmark and the Netherlands. The longest-lived minority coalition, from 1993 to 1996, rested on the anomaly of Arab parties remaining outside a government they supported. So much has changed in Israeli politics since the 1990's. The Joint List, as presently constituted, couldn't realistically enter into any governing coalition. But there's no reason to assume that at least one of its non-Islamist non-nationalist components — specifically the Hadash party — couldn't be a part of a future left-wing coalition, especially if its votes are pivotal in defeating the right.

If the threshold is not really ushering in tiny parties, governing coalitions are relatively easy to form, and minority governments are rare and not genuinely minorities anyway, then what's left on the charge sheet? A common complaint is that elections are too frequent and parliaments rarely last their full terms. The latter is true of the Knesset, but it is equally true of nearly every parliament. In the Knesset's first sixty years, there were exactly seventeen Parliaments, an average duration of three and a half years — not bad considering a full term is four years. Even this statistic leaves out the good part of the story, as it includes in it two very short-lived Knessets from the state's early days. In the last fifty years, no Knesset has sat for less than three years.

But aren't governing coalitions unstable? Aren't prime ministers always struggling to hold on to precarious majorities? The short answer is no. The long answer is no, too, actually. Again, it helps to separate out the first five Knessets — two of which were 'short Knessets' lasting only two years each, and one of which featured no fewer than four governing coalitions — from the twelve subsequent Knessets, each of which has served between three and four years and none of which had more than one reshuffle. In fact, even the numbers for the first five Knessets hide a certain stability — all were dominated by the same

man, David Ben-Gurion, who was prime minister for the duration of all five, save for two years at the end of the Second Knesset and two years at the end of the Fifth.

After my original article was published, Israel elected another 'short' Knesset which sat for only two years from 2013 to 2015. Three short parliaments out of 20 is not terribly alarming, but it's notable that all three occurred not in periods of governmental instability but rather in the middle of periods of exceptional stability. Ben-Gurion and Netanyahu are the only Prime Ministers to have served for more than a decade and the only ones to have served for more than seven consecutive years. All three short parliaments were during their tenures.

And nevertheless, we are told that governments are unstable and prime ministers are always struggling for survival rather than making long-term decisions. Perhaps they're not thinking for the long-term, but parliamentary survival can't take all the blame. The total number of governments that have fallen by no confidence votes in all of Israeli history is one (in 1990), and if it were zero, I would argue that that is a defect.

The Knesset is a noisy and chaotic place, but Israel is a noisy and chaotic place. The problem, if it is one, isn't in the elections. The noise and chaos of people who don't agree with me tends to be particularly annoying. To me. But that is the point, isn't it? Even after 70 years of statehood, it remains the only forum in the entire country where Israelis of all kinds actually have to listen to each other. Even when the outcome of a decision is easily known in advance, it still must go through trial by discussion according to formalistic procedures that gives it a status no other public decision has. No other Israeli institution does this — not the army, which doesn't draft Arabs or Haredim, not the High Court, certainly not the media.

Hidden Virtues

A society as deeply divided as Israel is — across race, religion, ideology — with such a high tolerance for violence and such a broad familiarity with weapons, should have by all comparative measures long ago descended into civil war. Nearly every other newly independent post-1945 state certainly did. Political violence has not been a completely absent feature of Israeli political life (No-

vember 1995 and October 2000 are two recent examples), but its few actual outbursts are memorable precisely for being so rare; it is generally experienced more as a menacing threat *in potentia*, a foreboding presence sublimated beneath the surface (the 1981 general election campaign, for example).

How did Israel manage to avoid the fate of nearly every other post-colonial state and avoid descending into civil war? At the moment of statehood, two immediate factors stood out. First, there was an enormous imbalance between the potential factions, unlike, say in Ireland of 1922 where those that were willing to accept partition and those that insisted that anything less than the entire island was a betrayal were roughly even. Second, Israel's national liberation, unlike so many other post-colonial births, wasn't just the end of one foreign domination, it was also the most threatening moment of another. Having to fend off a combined Arab invasion united disparate pre-statehood factions as no ideology could have.

Beyond 1948, though, there are two more factors that precluded a descent into internal fighting. The first is the civic religion which was constructed in Israel and known by the untranslatable Hebrew word *mamlakhtiut*. This austere republicanism, created almost entirely in the image of one man, David Ben-Gurion, never demanded from its citizens that they put aside their own communal or ideological attachments, but only that those always take second place to the institutions and interests of the state and its value as an end, rather than a means. The high point of this civic religion came four years after Ben-Gurion left the Prime Minister's Office for the last time in the Six Day War. In one of those historical ironies that should only exist in the theatre, *mamlakhtiut's* greatest success ushered in its undoing, unnoticed at the time by nearly everyone save for Ben-Gurion himself.

But by far the biggest institutional keeper of the peace, even in the face of the decline of the old republicanism — no, *especially* in the face of its decline — has been the very broad and inclusive basis of representation in the Knesset. The payoffs for marginal groups to stay in the legitimate game of Israeli domestic democratic politics are often quite small (and why should it be otherwise?), but they have always, thus far at least, been big enough to keep nearly everyone inside arguing rather than outside shooting. The only significant election boycott was in 2001 by the Arab sector in a special election for the Prime Min-

ister only — a one-of-a-kind event that was made possible by the now defunct Direct Election Law. The stakes were low — Arik Sharon was due to win by a landslide with or without Arab participation — and no Knesset seats were up for grabs. Very few of this community's grievances were answered in the two years that ensued, yet when the Knesset was dissolved in 2003, there was no recurrence of the boycott. The risks to Arabs of a boycott are too high, and the kind of Knesset that could be elected without their votes would make a return from such a boycott in a subsequent election exceedingly difficult and costly. It would be a breaking point for Israeli democracy, and, while the tacit, implicit threat might yield modest results, its actual use is saved only for extreme circumstances.

The Arab minority is not the only social group in Israel with a problematic relationship with the state and its institutions. Other sectors have their own resentments and parochial agendas, but having to present them in speech acts and public acts of bargaining, having to phrase them, however hypocritically and piously, in terms of the general interest, has a moderating influence on all parties. And the few policy treats the establishment throws at marginalised groups have been enough to keep the talking game going.

Bringing in as many voices as possible was the animating idea behind the electoral system the first time it was used in 1949. What is largely forgotten was that this was for a constituent assembly, not a regular Parliament. It was only once the assembly met that it retroactively declared itself the First Knesset and put off the business of writing a constitution — indefinitely (and, in my opinion, wisely). A different electoral system would have had to surmount logistical hurdles and need some sort of constitutive moment to legitimate itself, so the status quo, which has done so much to preserve the internal peace, has survived and thrived, despite all the scorn heaped upon it. If there was ever any hope that Israel might introduce an element of geographic representation into its electoral rules, the settlement of civilian populations in territories occupied but not annexed rendered that nearly impossible. Drawing constituency boundaries would require an honest discussion of the state's boundaries and risk highlighting the anomalies of Israeli democracy for the Israelis who have made their home beyond the frontier.

Learning by Example?

Why then does the Israeli electoral system attract so much ire? And how do easily refutable claims about the supposed instability of Israel's governments, the frequency of its elections or the proliferation of its parties attain such an impressive intellectual shelf-life despite being so clearly wrong?

One explanation is the dominance in Israeli political discourse of a referent which couldn't be any less relevant to Israeli democracy. Two centuries of American constitutional self-government leave much to admire and study, but very little of it will be useful to anyone trying to tackle the problems of Israel's democracy. For reasons that are obvious, but which have nothing to do with institutional or constitutional questions, the American example — or, more accurately, the American example as imagined by partially informed outside observers — looms very large in the Israeli imagination, largely due to its availability and familiarity, not to its applicability. The latest round of legislative elections in Sweden or Switzerland don't excite the news-consuming public in Israel in quite the way that American mid-term elections understandably do. As a result, Israelis often have a familiarity with the workings of American democracy and governance far beyond that which they have for any other country. It becomes the most readily available source for alternatives — even if only for ones that are to be rejected.

This is understandable but regrettable, because we are now learning from the experience of the one democracy that resembles Israel the least. To see this, it might help to list some of the salient structural features of Israeli democracy and come to grips with the kind of problems Israel's electoral method needs to provide solutions for.

Israeli democracy is characterised first by its (1) moderate (between 5 and 20 million citizens) size — not a micro-state or one large metropolis surrounded by hinterland, nor an enormous country with tens or hundreds of millions stretching over a gigantic land mass. It is further characterised by its (2) central, unitary government (rather than a federal system) and lack of natural geographic divisions which might lend themselves to a federal administration. Its national identity has been an enormously successful project of (3) linguistic and cultural consolidation across diverse immigrant groups, rather than a projection of

an old identity (or an image of one) on small numbers of newcomers. Its national ethos, though retaining many civic, republican, and ideological aspects, has a strong affinity to a particular (4) religious tradition; religious symbols are part of its flag and national narrative, and they are deeply meaningful for most of the population, even the majority that are not actively practising. It has a large (5) ethnic-linguistic minority, with its own collective memory and political traditions, and its own affinities with nations outside its boundaries; this minority is native to the land and not just an immigrant group in a suspended state of assimilation. And, as a mirror image to that, the majority ethnic group has a (6) large diaspora in other countries throughout the world. It retains a (7) large extra-territorial settler population with full voting rights in domestic elections in a territory where the non-settler majority enjoys no such right and no realistic hope or desire of gaining full citizenship.

Of lesser importance, though still relevant, is Israel's geostrategic position. It is surrounded (8) by much less developed, economically as well as politically, neighbours whose attitudes range from quite to very hostile. There is no plausible scenario in which the gaps in standards of living or quality of life between Israel and any of its neighbours will close; nor is there much more hope that the hostility will attenuate dramatically in our lifetimes. It (9) does not have borders which are both internationally recognised and domestically accepted. And it has for its entire history been (10) firmly in the pro-American camp of the post-1945 international order.

Of all these eleven characteristics of Israeli democracy, only (7) is unique. To the best of my knowledge, nothing like it has existed in any other advanced state since the end of the Portuguese presence in Mozambique and the French presence in Algeria. What is astonishing about the remaining ten items on this list is how many are shared with other advanced democracies — and how few are relevant for US democracy, except for (3) and, trivially, (10). On the other hand, countries as diverse as Ireland, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan all share between five and eight of the traits enumerated above. Each has carved a different path to its present democratic arrangements, with all the expected burdens of history and accident. Israelis would do well to learn from both the successes and failures of those countries' institutional arrangements long before trying to foist upon their own country a

provincially misunderstood American method.

Too much viewing of *The West Wing* could leave anyone longing for a presidential system, but we easily forget what little power over legislation an American president has at the federal level, and that anyway most law-making occurs at the state level where he has none. No such balance is plausible in the Israeli context, where the predictable result of a strong president with no one to report to would more closely resemble presidential experiments of other small and young democracies — intrigue, excess, attempts by the winner to shut out the loser, and a hunt by whoever is shut out for forums outside the constitutional order to press their cause.

It's easy to look at a newly elected Parliament and say, *there's far too little of me in there and way too much of you*. But this cannot be the basis for any serious institutional reform. When I first approached this topic seven years ago, the problem that most vexed critics of Israel's electoral system was governmental instability; today it is the lack of term limits. Oddly, the only electoral change in the interim was the raising of the threshold. On the other hand, there has been a steady tenure of a Prime Minister that most of the intellectual class dislikes intensely. You'll have to pardon my cynicism.

Israeli parliamentarism has served its people well, and we should exercise extreme caution in changing it. Some caution would have been in order before Israeli political parties rushed headlong into the single most destructive reform in democratic life in Israel (and not just in Israel): primaries. But this was a reform that was never legislated and is anyway fading.

More meaningful electoral reform has been more difficult to pass, and we should probably be grateful for that. Not that I don't have my own wish list. At 120 seats, the Knesset is far too small to adequately represent Israel's large population and its various divisions. Occasionally a crucial constituency only has two or three representatives. When one becomes a minister or deputy minister, there is really no one left to do important parliamentary work. At least 60 more MKs (or even 120 more), with some elected on a regional basis, would be a welcome modernisation.

But I'd rather keep the current system than risk letting today's winners entrench

their victories with an imagined efficiency that solves problems we don't have and erases the unique benefits of a system that has managed to keep everyone inside, gives everyone a voice to be heard, and lets no one dominate. The risks of driving people to the outside (i.e. civil violence) are just too high.



FORGET LEFT AND RIGHT. 'DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE' OR 'NATION STATE LAW' IS NOW THE REAL DIVIDE IN ISRAELI POLITICS

PAUL GROSS

Paul Gross argues that the most fundamental difference between the main parties in the upcoming elections is not to be found on the Right-Left spectrum on national security or economic policy but rather in starkly contrasting visions for the State of Israel: either the liberal democracy envisaged by Zionists from Theodore Herzl, David Ben-Gurion and Ze'ev Jabotinsky embodied in the Declaration of Independence; or the illiberal nationalism represented by the loudest promoters of the Nation-State Law.

Declaration of Independence vs. Nation-State Law

For many Israeli voters, 20 February 2019 was the day which simplified the choice facing them in this election. The day began with the news that, panicked about fragmentation on the Israeli Right, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu succeeded in persuading the now rump Bayit Yehudi (Jewish Home) party to run together with the far-right, racist Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power). It ended with news that, after much speculation, Yair Lapid and Benny Gantz had agreed to run together as the leaders of a joint list – 'Blue and White'.

Yet these seemingly seismic political developments only served to confirm the already existing fault line broadly dividing Israel's political parties into two camps – not so much Left vs. Right as 'Declaration of Independence' vs. 'Nation-State Law'.

Weeks before this day of political mergers, Gantz addressed a crowd of Druze protestors, angry at the new Nation-State Law (in the absence of a written constitution, Basic Laws have quasi-constitutional force in the Israeli system). He pledged that, as prime minister, he would look into amending the law, addressing the Druze community's concern that the law creates a hierarchy of citizenship, with non-Jews rendered second-class. In so doing he promised to

strengthen ‘the State of Israel as a Jewish and democratic country in light of the Zionist vision expressed in the Declaration of Independence’.

The implications of this statement were unsurprisingly overlooked. Surely an appeal to Israel’s founding document was, as Americans would say, ‘motherhood and apple pie’; universally understood to be ‘a good thing’. Well, no. The reality is that many members of the recently dissolved Knesset would be unwilling to sign up to the Declaration were it resubmitted for approval today. This includes not just the obvious refuseniks, those Arab MKs who would reject its central principle of the right to Jewish national self-determination in the historic Land of Israel, but several members of most parties comprising the outgoing coalition government (probably exempting Kulanu). Their objection would be to sections that allude to Israel’s liberal democratic intentions, in particular: ‘... *[the State of Israel] will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture ...*’

This isn’t idle speculation but based on the voting and legislative record of coalition members. The [Israel Democracy Institute \(IDI\)](#) has described this outgoing Knesset in historically negative terms, as ‘the most injurious of all with regard to democratic values, freedom of expression, gatekeeping and, above all, minority rights’. A raft of government bills were proposed, some passed into law, some not, attacking the independence of the Supreme Court and freedom of expression, as well as proposals specifically designed to prevent or forestall the consequences of the criminal indictment of Benjamin Netanyahu.

Tourism Minister Yariv Levin, one of the most senior and influential Likud members, has defined a ‘Jewish and democratic state’ as first and foremost a Jewish state, with democracy a purely functional matter pertaining to how the government is chosen. It is what [Yohanan Plesner, the President of IDI, has called ‘majoritarian’ or ‘hollow’ democracy](#), as opposed to the ‘substantive’ democracy, which Israel has enjoyed, more-or-less, since its establishment, with equality before the law, a separation of powers, an independent judiciary, and the rule of law. Such a majoritarian democratic outlook inevitably deals in the currency of populism, with the majority looking to retain power through feed-

ing the fears and prejudices of its electoral base, demonising other sectors of society and attacking the legitimacy of institutions that are a check on the government's power. (As Yair Lapid pithily put it, checks and balances are required to ensure that 61 Knesset members cannot simply vote away the civil rights of the other 59.)

The relevance of the Nation-State Law lies in the explicit rejection of the Declaration of Independence by the coalition members who most forcefully promoted it. (For example, Levin and Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked, who exemplified the law's majoritarian spirit by proclaiming pre-eminence of 'Jewish' over 'democratic' in a rebuke to the Supreme Court, said: 'Zionism will not continue to bend its neck to a system of individual rights.') The absence of any language invoking the 'equality' wording of the Declaration is stark, especially when one considers that an alternative draft was proposed, explicitly incorporating the language of the Declaration, (not by a member of the opposition, but by the Likud's own Benny Begin) and subsequently rejected. That version has since been adopted as the preferred draft of the Yesh Atid party, which forms one part of the new Blue and White party.

Ultimately, the gravity of this moment in Israel's legislative history is not – as some more hysterical critics have alleged – that the Nation-State Law moves the country overnight from democracy to ethnocracy. The actual legal provisions of the law are not so far-reaching. Its real significance is the political trajectory it sets for Israel. This law was intended to be the preamble of Israel's future constitution, the opening declarative statement of *what the State of Israel is*. Many of the supporters of the Nation-State Law, and certainly its drafters – principal figures in the Likud and what is now the New Right party – intend for it to be the most authoritative self-definition of the State of Israel, displacing the Declaration of Independence, which informally had that role up to now. These MKs have a different conception of what democracy means in a Jewish state, than those who voted against. Theirs is a reimagining of 'Jewish and democratic,' quite at odds with the expressed intentions of Israel's founders, who all – whether socialist or liberal, secular or religious – signed the Declaration of Independence.

Not simply Left vs. Right

The division between two conceptions of democracy, and two different definitions of 'Jewish and democratic' *could* be more easily rendered as 'Left and Right'. But it is a simplification that should be resisted. It is true that the parties that clearly identify with the Declaration of Independence are mainly on the Left and Centre (Meretz, Labor, Blue and White). But what to make of Moshe Yaalon's Telem faction, running as the junior partner with Gantz in Blue and White? A former hawkish Likud Defence Minister, Yaalon and others on his list are very much part of the Israeli Right. As of course is Benny Begin of the Likud, who abstained in the final vote. Both Begin and Yaalon oppose the establishment of a Palestinian state – *the* definitive right-wing position in Israel. But both share the Declaration of Independence conception of what Israel should be: a Jewish state with equal rights for its non-Jewish citizens

Begin is part of a dying breed in the Likud, a liberal nationalist in the mold of his father Menachem, the first Likud prime minister, and it is no surprise that he has decided against running this time around. An earlier liberal refugee from the Likud, Dan Meridor, observed: 'Likud was a unique mix of two great ideas. The liberal idea of the rule of law, human rights, of the importance of the individual; and the national story of the Jews. This delicate balance was led by Menachem Begin when he headed Likud ... this balance has been disturbed in favour of more nationalistic, national-religious ideas.'

Despite the claims from Netanyahu and others that to oppose the Nation-State Law is to be 'a leftist,' some of the most trenchant criticism came from Begin-ite right-wingers, such as President Reuven Rivlin, and former ministers Meridor and the late Moshe Arens.

Yaalon associated himself with this group when he [resigned as defence minister and quit the party](#): '... the majority here is sane and seeks a Jewish, democratic and liberal state ... but to my great regret, extremist and dangerous forces have taken over Israel and the Likud movement and are destabilising our home and threatening to harm its inhabitants ... this is not the Likud I joined – the Likud of Ze'ev Jabotinsky and Menachem Begin.'

The reference to Jabotinsky is instructive. The founder of Revisionist Zionism

– ostensibly ‘right-wing Zionism’ – was actually a profoundly liberal, and quite brilliant political thinker. He believed that the Jews would have to fight long and hard against the Arabs to win independence and to continue to defend their new state, but he was also committed to completely equal rights for Arab citizens of that state. More specifically, Jabotinsky spoke forcefully against the tyranny of the majority, insisting on strong civil institutions to protect minority rights. He even pre-empted the Nation-State Law debate, declaring his belief that state constitutions should not ‘include special paragraphs explicitly guaranteeing its “national” character ... the best and most natural way is for the “national” character of the state to be guaranteed by the fact of its having a certain majority’.

‘Illiberal democrats’

So if not ‘Left vs. Right,’ what terminology would be most applicable for this democratic divide? ‘Liberal’ vs. ‘illiberal’ perhaps. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban coined the phrase ‘illiberal democracy’ to describe his ideology and there are certain similarities between the legislative proposals of Israel’s ‘Nation-State’ parties, and those of populist governments in Europe such as [Hungary and Poland](#). Culture Minister Miri Regev’s attempt to impose a ‘loyalty’ criteria on arts and culture projects that receive state funding for example, or Shaked’s proposed ‘supersession law,’ which would allow a simple majority of the Knesset to overturn a Supreme Court decision. (The degree to which Shaked sees the Court as a threat to her vision of ‘democracy’ is apparent in the extraordinary parallel implied by a prominent election slogan of her New Right party: “[Naftali] Bennett will defeat Hamas; Shaked will defeat the Supreme Court”.) Both Regev’s and Shaked’s efforts seem to echo the intent – if not the extent – of authoritarian moves in Budapest and Warsaw.

It is worth noting, however, that neither of these bills became law. And here some restraint is called for in comparing Israel to countries where liberal democracy has basically fallen apart. Though Israel is not the US, with its written constitution and multi-layered system of checks and balances, neither is it a relatively recent democracy like Hungary, Poland or Brazil. Israel was established as a liberal democracy and has remarkably retained that status throughout its nearly 71 tumultuous years. It has a hyper-active and influential media that, with relatively few exceptions such as the slavishly pro-Netanyahu newspaper

Israel Hayom, freely and routinely criticise the government. The Supreme Court remains a powerful check on majoritarian impulses; while senior civil servants like the Attorney General and the Civil Service Commissioner can and do act against executive power when it is deemed to have crossed legal or ethical lines.

The much-maligned Israeli electoral system also mitigates against one, all-powerful populist party taking charge. Israeli coalitions always feature multiple parties, and it is extremely unlikely that a prime minister would be able to reach the magic number of 61 Knesset seats – a governing majority – exclusively with avowedly illiberal parties. The outgoing government, frequently referred to as ‘the most right-wing in Israel’s history,’ nevertheless contained one party with more moderate sensibilities. Kulanu entered the coalition having obtained from Netanyahu a guarantee that they could vote against government legislation which threatened the Supreme Court and the rule of law. (It is not incidental that in this election, Kulanu is running as ‘the sane right,’ with none other than Menachem Begin featuring on campaign posters alongside party leader Moshe Kahlon.)

No, Israel is not an ‘illiberal democracy’. Not all 62 of the MKs who voted in favor of the Nation-State Law did so out of a wish to move the country away from its liberal democratic moorings. Many were simply following party discipline. Nevertheless, within the parties which make up today’s Israeli Right other than Kulanu (Likud, the New Right, United Right and Yisrael Beiteinu) there are a number of prominent illiberal democrats, and right now they seem to be in the ascendancy. Netanyahu himself was historically not part of this group, but his all-consuming desperation to cling to power has led him to become arguably the most illiberal of them all. He is calling the shots in a Likud election campaign that has smeared the Attorney General, the police, the media and most political opponents as ‘leftists,’ and ‘unpatriotic,’ promoting [wild conspiracy theories](#) straight out of the authoritarian populist playbook.

The choice ahead

This coming election will likely see a return to the days of two big parties gaining over half the Knesset seats between them. Unless Netanyahu is persuaded to step down as leader of his party (for example, after unexpectedly poor election results) the next government of the State of Israel will be led by either the

Blue and White of Gantz and Lapid, or the Likud of Netanyahu. The most fundamental difference between the two does not lie in specific domestic or foreign policies, but in their vision for the State of Israel: either the liberal democracy envisaged by Zionists from Herzl, to Ben-Gurion to Jabotinsky, and promised in the Declaration of Independence; or the illiberal nationalism represented by the loudest promoters of the Nation-State Law. The stakes are high indeed.



ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN RELATIONS AND THE 2019 ELECTION

JONATHAN RYNHOLD

Israeli Jews are deeply sceptical, even incredulous, about the peace process, and are instead focused on maintaining security, argues Jonathan Rynhold of Bar-Ilan University. Nonetheless, the composition of the next coalition will play a major role in determining Israel's policy towards the Palestinians going forward, especially regarding changes to the reality on the ground in the West Bank and in the use of strengthening regional cooperation against Iran to make progress on the peace track.

Israel has no foreign policy, only a defence policy with international implications. Moshe Dayan

Israel has no foreign policy, only domestic politics. Henry Kissinger

The Palestinian issue is no longer central to elections

For many years, the conflict with the Palestinians was central to Israeli elections. Candidates vigorously debated the rights and wrongs of the Oslo process, Palestinian statehood, settlements, unilateral withdrawals and various peace plans. To win the election, a party would have to present a judicious mixture of policies designed to promote both peace and security in order to win over that part of the electorate that oscillates between the Left and the Right. In 2019 however, the candidates are not talking much about these issues. Indeed the Centre and the Left seem to be trying very hard to avoid talking about them. In any case, the public is not particularly interested.

As far as the overwhelming majority of Israelis are concerned, there is no chance of reaching a peace deal with the Palestinians or what is left of Syria in the medium term. About half of all Israelis still support a two-state solution in principle, but even among the dwindling number who still identify as 'Left',

about half share this pessimistic assessment.

Belief in a negotiated peace disintegrated in 2000, with the onset of the Second Intifada characterised by unprecedented levels of suicide bombings and Arafat's rejection of the Clinton Parameters, which would have given the Palestinians a state encompassing almost all of the West Bank and Gaza with its capital in Arab East Jerusalem and control over the Temple Mount. Abbas's rejection of a similar peace plan put forward by Olmert in 2008 and again by the Obama Administration in 2014, reinforced this scepticism. It also dealt a massive blow to the Left's political brand in Israel, from which it is yet to recover.

Meanwhile support for unilateral Israeli initiatives collapsed in 2006. Following unilateral withdrawals from southern Lebanon in 2000 and Gaza in 2005, the Israeli public was bombarded with thousands of missiles launched from those areas by Hamas and Hezbollah. After 400,000 Israelis had to be evacuated from their homes in the north during the Second Lebanon War, and the Israeli town of Sderot, adjacent to Gaza, became the bomb-shelter capital of the world, Israelis had had enough. A majority had supported the evacuation of all 8000 settlers from Gaza, but subsequently opinion shifted. The underlying sentiment among the public can be summed up thus: why should 'middle Israel' drag thousands of Israeli settlers in the West Bank out of their homes and in exchange face thousands of rockets directed at their own homes within the pre-1967 boundaries?

The consensus in Israel has become deeply sceptical, even incredulous, about the peace process and all its 'diplomatic paraphernalia'. Instead, Israelis are focused on maintaining security. Here again there is a consensus. While the 1982 Lebanon War and the First Intifada were politically contentious, all of Israel's military campaigns fought since the collapse of the Oslo Process have received very wide support with the only debate being over the wisdom of the tactics employed (on the strategic level it is accepted that there is no choice but to engage in combat for the foreseeable future).

Netanyahu is seen as a safe pair of hands

For the last decade, Netanyahu has consistently been viewed by a plurality of the public as by far the most suitable candidate to be Prime Minister, even as a

majority have been dissatisfied with many aspects of his performance. The key to his success has been the public's sense that he is a safe pair of hands in the security realm and perception that there is no one else who could do a better job. Relatively speaking, his term in office has been marked by short, limited conflicts with a low level of terrorism and Israeli casualties. In addition, Netanyahu is seen as having an excellent relationship with Israel's most important ally, the United States and a significant degree of influence over the Trump Administration. Israelis also give Netanyahu high marks for signs of improvement in Israel's relations with the Gulf States; relations which include the Prime Minister's visit to Oman and the playing of Hatikva at a Judo competition in the UAE. A majority believe it is possible to normalise these relations without making concessions to the Palestinians, even though this is highly unlikely.

Netanyahu does deserve credit for the way he has carefully managed the conflict with Hamas. Much of the Israeli public however, is unaware of the deep damage Netanyahu has wrought to Israel's relations with the Democratic Party in the US. As both AIPAC and the Israeli security community have long understood, bipartisan support for Israel is a foundation of the special relationship. Democrats have had their policy disagreements with various Israeli governments, but this did not affect the fact that they continued to sympathize with Israel over the Palestinians by a margin of about 2:1. According to the respected polling organisation, Pew, that margin has almost disappeared. Analysis of the data indicates clearly that this is primarily due to the perception of the Prime Minister as siding with the Republicans against Obama and being in favour of President Trump. This is not the only cause of Israel's troubled relations with the Democrats, but it is the most important.

Moreover, despite their close relationship, Trump could still undermine Netanyahu's ability to form a coalition, if, as members of the Administration have indicated, the President presents his peace plan soon after the April 9 elections. The plan will almost certainly involve concessions that will divide the Israeli Right leaving Netanyahu in a difficult position. Open praise for the plan would splinter the Right, while open criticism would likely destroy his personal relationship with Trump and bury any chance he would have of including centre or centre-right parties.

Competition for ‘Mr Security’ title

In any case, there is now a genuine conversation and debate over which leader and which party is best able to handle the challenges to Israeli security. Netanyahu and the Likud have lost their trump card. The Blue and White party is headed by a former Chief of Staff, Benny Gantz, and its leadership includes two other Chiefs of Staff in Gabi Ashkenazi and Moshe ‘Bogie’ Yaalon, who also served as Defence Minister under Netanyahu. This could become a particularly pertinent factor if things heat up on the Gaza border.

Ultimately the question is whether this security triumvirate has the political nous to translate their military credentials into political victory against Israel’s most successful politician since David Ben-Gurion.

If all they accomplish is becoming the largest party by hoovering up votes that would have gone to other centre and left parties, they will fail. Being the largest party in the Knesset is certainly a factor in determining who forms the government, but ultimately it is the party that can best command a majority in the Knesset that forms the government. Given the Right and religious parties open hostility to serving under Gantz, in order to win, Blue and White will have to peel away votes from the Right-religious bloc in order to shift the coalition dynamics in their favour. Even a shift of two or three seats moving from Right to Centre could make all the difference.

The potential for progress towards regional normalisation and the two-state solution

Finally, just because the campaign is not about Israeli-Palestinian affairs, does not mean the result of the election is irrelevant to the future direction of the conflict. The nature of the next coalition will play a major role in determining Israel’s policy going forward.

Twice in the last five years, Israel has been close to a breakthrough in relations with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states; once in the summer of 2014 when the Mossad took charge of the talks and again in 2016, when Netanyahu and then Labour opposition leader Isaac Herzog, came to an agreement in principle to form a national unity government. On both occasions Netanyahu backed out at

the last minute, citing pressure from the Right.

Driven by the need to come together to face the increased level of threat emulating from Iran, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states have dramatically shifted their position towards Israel by lowering the price for moves towards normalisation, in terms of economic relations, public meetings and more. These states are now willing to take more significant steps towards normalisation prior to a final status deal with the Palestinians, well beyond the small public steps taken so far. In return, they would expect Israeli moves that demonstrably advance the future prospects of Palestinian independence, such as expanding the territory under Palestinian civilian control in Area C of the West Bank and ending the expansion of settlements outside the major blocs, most of which would likely be incorporated into Israel as part of a territorial swap in any permanent status peace treaty.

This window of opportunity is still open, though it is impossible to know for how long. What is clear from experience is that a right-wing coalition would be opposed to such moves. On the other hand, a centrist coalition led by Ganz would be in favour. Even one of the more hawkish leaders of Blue and White, Yaalon, has written favourably about the key aspects of this package. While interim moves of this kind might appear to be relatively insignificant compared to the media extravaganza of the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, they could well be of fateful long-term importance. They would tilt the reality on the ground in the West Bank in the direction of partition – the two-state solution – without threatening Israeli security. Indeed, it would bolster security by strengthening regional cooperation against Iran. It might even restore some hope among Israelis and Palestinians that peace is possible.



TOWARDS A CONSENSUS ON NATIONAL SECURITY ISSUES?

JONATHAN SPYER

To what extent is the current Israeli election campaign dominated by national security issues, as has historically been the case? Jonathan Spyer argues that a new consensus over national security issues is emerging in Israeli politics that stretches across the political spectrum, leading the main parties to focus on the different personalities, and not the different policies, of the parties.

A time worn truism holds that Israeli elections, and Israeli political debate in general, are dominated by issues related to national security, which centred around the advisability of 'land for peace' with the Palestinians, as well as similar questions regarding other neighbouring adversaries, most importantly Syria, following the conclusion of peace with Egypt in 1979.

It was also commonly asserted that Israel was bitterly divided on these matters into two camps of roughly equal size.

To what extent does such a depiction still hold? Is the current Israeli election campaign dominated by national security issues? Is the Palestinian question still salient and central? And how does the debate between the leading parties and camps divide on these issues, if they are still dominant?

It's not the economy, stupid

A couple of important points should be noted at the outset: firstly, it is without doubt that questions of Israel's external relations and security questions are still salient in Israeli political debate. Attempts (primarily on the Left) to refocus the debate onto socio-economic issues in recent years – for example during the period of leadership of the Labor Party under former journalist Shelly Yachimovich in 2011-2013, and under former Histadrut leader Amir Peretz in 2005-7 – did not have the desired electoral affect.

The Israeli public still primarily seeks a leadership it perceives able enough to provide security. The interesting element of the 2019 campaign is that while 'security' and the perception of a credible stance of security remains the key attribute to which parties wish to attribute themselves, there is in fact an absence of deep and substantive difference on the main issues comprising Israel's challenges in this field among the major parties contending the election. This absence leads to a lack of focus on substantive security issues and instead efforts by each party to portray the other as untrustworthy and lacking integrity.

The challenges from Iran and the Palestinian national movement

The key issues composing the security challenges facing Israel today are two-fold:

firstly, the strategy of the Islamic Republic of Iran intended to result in the dissolution of Israel as a state. This is to be achieved through a combination of a long hybrid war waged partly directly by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and partly via the sponsoring of irregular and semi-regular paramilitary proxies on Israel's borders, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Islamic Jihad among the Palestinians, neighbouring regimes hostile to Israel (such as Assad in Syria), and the Iranian missile and nuclear programs.

Secondly, the security challenge of Hamas-controlled Gaza, and of the unresolved conflict with the Palestinian Arab national movement.

Yet despite the serious, even potentially existential nature of these two threats, the 2019 election campaign has not been characterised by any impassioned debate on substantive issues within them. This is due to an almost complete consensus between a broad mass of the Israeli (Jewish) public on the first issue, and a decline in the level of polarisation within the Jewish voting public over the last two decades regarding the second.

Near agreement on dealing with the Iranian threat

Regarding Iran, former IDF Chief of Staff Benny Gantz, leader of the Blue and White list, which forms the main challenger to the ruling Likud party in the 2019 campaign, has made clear that there are no disagreements between himself and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on the question of Iran and the

threat it poses.

The consensus, however, goes beyond the rightist Likud and centrist Blue and White party. Labor and Meretz, representing the centre-Left and left-wing spots on the political map, are similarly supportive of the government's stance on Iran. Right-wing parties such as Yisrael Beiteinu and HaYemin HaChadash (the New Right) have avoided criticising the government also, as well as refraining from the demands for greater militancy that characterise their criticisms of the government's performance on the Palestinian issue.

Even the Joint List, which represents Arab Israeli citizens and united Arab nationalist, Islamist and far Left trends, has tended to remain silent on the issue of Iran, expressing neither support nor criticism for Israel's stance (though elements within it, specifically in the Arab nationalist Balad party are clearly supportive of the Bashar Assad regime in Syria). In the past, the Joint List declined to take up two available places on the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee, indicating that it preferred to focus on domestic issues. For the 2019 elections the Joint List has separated into its component parts, with Ahmed Tibi and the Ta'al list set to run together with Hadash (the Israeli communist party) while Balad and Ra'am (the Islamist 'United Arab list') will also run together.

The rise and fall of the Palestinian issue

Regarding the Palestinian issue, the situation is not as straightforward. Between 1967 and 2000, but particularly in the pre-1990 period, the Israeli political debate was characterised by very deep polarisation centrally over this issue.

The left-wing position, as exemplified in Labor, Mapam, Ratz and later Meretz, held that territorial concessions in the West Bank and Gaza were necessary for the achievement of peace and a secure future for Israel. The preferred recipient of these concessions changed from Jordan to the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) in the course of the 1980s. On the Right, the Likud and the far-Right nationalist parties opposed any such concessions on both security and ethno-nationalist grounds, on the basis that the lands captured during the 1967 Six-Day War constituted a part of the Jewish patrimony, and hence could not be conceded. They also argued that the ceding of these lands would involve an

unreasonable risk to the security of Israel's citizens.

In the subsequent period, however, this debate has lost much of its passion. On the Left, the belief that a partner for historic compromise had been found in the PLO lost many adherents after the collapse of the peace process and the commencement of Palestinian insurgency in late 2000. On the Right, the fervent and ideological commitment to avoidance of any land concessions west of the Jordan River also faded.

This has been reflected in the 2019 campaign. The main contenders – Likud and Blue and White, are clearly competing for the centre ground. Yair Lapid, second on the Blue and White Knesset list, gave an interview with Israel's Channel 2 programme 'Meet the Press' on 23 February where compared his list with the traditional Likud, seeking to cast the current Likud as a far-right party and his own as a 'national, liberal' list. Netanyahu and the Likud, meanwhile, have so far portrayed Blue and White as 'weak' and 'leftist' in their election campaigning, hinting that their rivals favour a return to a policy of unilateral withdrawals west of the Jordan River. This in turn is denied by Blue and White, despite the fact that a US proposed peace plan appears to be rolled out very soon, and thus substantive public debate on issues related to this might be expected, although this has not taken place.

Near-convergence of the main parties

The emerging result from all of this is an election campaign somewhat void of content and policy substance in the security field. The central issue instead is one of personalities and 'fitness to govern,' with the opposition focusing on the prime minister's legal travails and the coalition seeking to present Gantz as weak and indecisive.

But the personalisation of the debate and the absence of substantive discussion on security matters are not only or mainly symptoms of a more general impoverishment of public discourse. Rather, they relate to the emergence of a large consensus on key matters of national security in the Israeli centre. The near convergence of the main parties on these issues is then disguised by an absence of focus on them, and instead a focus on the personalities leading the main parties, along with attempts of each to create the impression that the other

is the one which deviates from this consensus – either in the direction of the ‘Left’ or the ‘far-Right’.

For this reason, there has been much focus from each side on efforts to associate Netanyahu and the Likud with the far-Right (because of Netanyahu’s efforts to unite radical Right forces in order that the rightist bloc would not waste votes), versus allegations by the Right that Gantz’s list might end up relying on the forces of the Arab parties, including Arab nationalist and Islamist MKs, in order to achieve a working majority in parliament. The passions raised on such issues serve to conceal the key point – namely, the large amount of policy convergence that exists between the main parties in Israel on key matters of national security.



THE NEED FOR POLITICAL PARTNERSHIP

RON GERLITZ

Ron Gerlitz, the Co-Executive Director of Sikkuy, The Association for Civic Equality in Israel, argues that only a political alliance between the Jewish left, the Jewish centre, and Arab citizens has a chance of preventing the Israeli right from continuing in power and that such an alliance is feasible.

Three large segments of the Israeli public – the Jewish left, Jewish Centre and the country’s Arab citizens – face tremendous political challenges in modern day Israel. Substantial differences in ideology and identity separate them, yet the same ultra-right-wing government is battering them all, and all three are seeking an end to that. The best way to oust the present right-wing government is to create a political alliance among the three, and such an alliance, even if not the close to being forged at present, is entirely possible. As things stand now, there is no other way. The right wing is consolidating its rule by all possible means, and the prospect of leftist and centrist parties collectively obtaining 61 seats is negligible. If the 10 to 13 seats projected for the current configuration of parties representing Arab citizens (Balad-Raam and Hadash-Taal) are not counted toward the base of support for the next government, there will be no reasonable chance to form a non-right-wing government.

Prime Minister Netanyahu understands this very well and that’s why his election campaign has gone on the offensive against Benny Gantz and Yair Lapid, who head the new centrist Blue and White party. Netanyahu accuses them of harbouring extremely dangerous plans, including the intent to form a government reliant on the support of Arab citizens. “It’s Bibi or Tibi” he repeats at every opportunity. This theme continues a well-worn and constant effort by the right wing to delegitimize Arab participation in the governing coalition. In light of this, the failure to somehow create a working partnership of the Jewish left, the Jewish centre, and Arab representatives will actually be furthering the chief

project of Israel's right wing.

There are two common misperceptions about such a partnership. Among the Jewish mainstream, the misperception that the Arab political leadership is not a valid partner in this respect is attributable primarily to decades of increasingly intense right-wing incitement against both Arab leaders and Arab voters. Meanwhile, the Arab public believes it has no partner in the Jewish left and centre, a conviction undoubtedly reinforced by Avi Gabbay's drastic pronouncement in October 2017 that he would not join a government which includes the Joint Arab List. The same lesson was hammered home again in early March 2019, when the new centrist party, Blue and White, supported a disgraceful decision by the Knesset to disqualify the Balad-Raam Arab list from competing in the April election, a decision subsequently overturned by the High Court of Justice who decided to allow the list to take part in the election.

Here, I argue that the typical conclusions drawn in this regard were made in error, and that a reasonable political partnership enabling regime change is politically feasible. Under certain conditions, moreover, it would enjoy broad support from the Arab public and most of the Arab political leadership. Certainly, the Jewish left and centre would consider supporting such a move in order to return to power.

Blueprint for partnership: The Rabin precedent of a civil majority

The second Rabin administration (1992-1995) was the first and so far the only government to rely on the Arab members of the Knesset. In the 1992 elections, Labor won 44 seats, Meretz 12, Hadash 3, and the Arab Democratic Party 2. Shas, which won 6 seats, initially joined the government before leaving in 1993 when the Oslo Accords were signed in September 1993. Rabin's government subsequently became a minority government (with 56 seats) and was supported from the outside by the parties representing the Arab public; Hadash and the Arab Democratic Party. These two Arab parties, it should be noted, voted with the government from the outset in July 1992, with such support becoming critical in enabling the Rabin administration to remain in power once it became a minority government.

The Rabin government shattered the undemocratic notion that the govern-

ment's base of support must be a Jewish majority, by relying instead on a civil majority. The agreement between Rabin and the representatives of the Arab voting public was that so long as the government strove for peace with the Palestinians and advanced equality for Arab citizens of Israel, Hadash and the Arab Democratic Party would prevent the right from ousting the government. Both sides kept their end of the bargain. The Arabs supported the government through every no-confidence motion that threatened to topple it, and for two years had unprecedented influence on government policy. While they were not formally part of the coalition, their support enabled the government not merely to survive but to also carry out the most dramatic moves since the establishment of the state – recognition of the PLO in exchange for the recognition of Israel's right to exist in peace and security, the signing of the Oslo Accords, and Israel's military withdrawal from Gaza and Jericho. The government also took preliminary but important steps to redress longstanding discrimination toward Arab citizens – ending the embarrassing discrimination in child support allowances, recognition for several unrecognised Arab communities, and adding momentum to budget allocations for Arab local authorities. The change in policy and rhetoric was palpable, and there are many in Arab society who both recognise that time as the golden era of their relations with the state and support the re-establishment of such a government. Indeed, an early March op-ed in the New York Times by MK Ayman Odeh argued just this.

The partnership enabled the left to return to power 15 years after the electoral upset of 1977 and to promote unprecedented steps toward reconciliation with the Palestinians, as well as enabling the Arab political leadership to initiate new progress toward reducing socioeconomic gaps and changing policies in a way consonant with the national aspirations of the Palestinian people.

This fragile political understanding between the Zionist left and the Arabs endured many hardships. But the agreement was honored by both sides until a lone right-wing extremist ended it by assassinating the prime minister.

While the Oslo process did not ultimately lead to peace, we cannot know what might have been without Rabin's murder and the subsequent election of Netanyahu, who set his sights on destroying the Oslo Accords. In any case, the shared political objective of the Jewish left and centre, as well as today's Arab leadership, is for the Government of Israel to once again try again to reach

peace with the Palestinians – something a right-wing government will not do.

Toward a new blocking majority

I will describe here, a blueprint for a less-than-close partnership in which the Arab MKs are not members of a centre-left coalition but instead support it externally as a so-called blocking majority, as was the case during the second Rabin government. I will also describe what could make this possible in the current or future elections and what actions need to be taken in order to build such a partnership and replace the current government.

In recent years, supporters of the Jewish centre and left in Israel, have witnessed a drastic deterioration of the values they hold dear. The government and the man who leads it do damage to the rule of law and to the independence of the nation's highest court, while augmenting the settlements and reinforcing the occupation. The prime minister and members of his cabinet, regularly incite against the left and against Arabs. Many people believe that the current administration, corrupt and frightened, is leading the country over the edge and into the abyss.

Meanwhile, Arab citizens are subject to unprecedented and incessant political assault. Notwithstanding the economic interests behind recent government movement toward more equitable budgeting policies for Arab towns, on nearly all other fronts, the government continues to systematically, frontally and uninhibitedly undermine the rights of Arab citizens. The wave of legislation eroding their civil rights and legal status was epitomized by the now-notorious Nation-State Law in July of 2018 and has been compounded by slanderous ministerial mudslinging that depicts Arab leaders as traitors who collaborate with the enemy, repeated attempts to undermine Arab political representation, and plenty more villainy of that nature.

The majority of Arab citizens, along with the Jewish centre and left understand that the only way to alter this vicious reality is to displace the rightist government. However, none of these three groups can achieve that alone. It can only be done by a government led by the centre or the left and supported in one way or another by the MKs who represent the Arab public, as in the second Rabin administration, which owed its existence to the support of the Arab MKs.

Such a government would represent the majority of the citizenry, who despite their significant disagreements and disparities, can still agree on the practical directions that the government of Israel must foster. This majority can, and must, be translated into a functional partnership that will replace the current government.

In a normal democratic system, the parties that represent most Arab citizens would be an integral part of a future governing coalition, but the prospects for that in the current climate seem dim. The external support from Arab MKs for a centre-left government, however (in exchange for fulfilment of a list of demands, naturally), without their being an actual part of the government but while functioning as part of its base of support – is an achievable goal and should be a key action objective for anyone interested in a change of government in this next or any future election.

Why conventional wisdom is wrong

Conventional wisdom says that this is political fantasy and unachievable. In fact, that view is the outcome of three factors: a systematic proactive approach by the right, targeting just such a potential partnership; irresponsible declarations by politicians on all sides of that potential partnership; and barriers that may seem intractable but are not. Here is a list:

To begin with, the Jewish centre and left and the Arab mainstream straddle the two sides of the Zionist-Palestinian conflict. In this potential political partnership, each would accord political legitimacy to the other. Given our reality in which most Arab citizens see Zionism as a racist movement, the Jewish centre and left will find it hard to politically connect with them. Arab citizens likewise find it difficult to connect with a government that adheres to the Zionist ideology that brought them the Nakba and the loss of their homeland. The clear recognition that the alternative to this partnership must be disastrous for both sides, however, is what can make such an arrangement possible.

Secondly, and this is a central impediment, the Jewish public, and the influential figures who shape Jewish opinion on the left and in the centre, believe that Arab political leaders are not prepared to accept such a development. This inaccurate view is based on inadequate familiarity with the Arab political lead-

ership in Israel. The vast majority of that leadership understands that the only route to curbing the government's political attacks against Arab citizens and perhaps also moving us closer to an end to the occupation is via the replacement of this rightist government with a government of the centre-left. If they have an opportunity to choose, in exchange (of course) for clear demands, Arab political leaders will support such a government from the outside in order to block another right-wing government.

The position of the Arab Parties

It is worth examining the position taken on this issue by each of the four parties that represent Arab citizens and are running in April 2019 on two lists, each of which comprises two parties. Members of Knesset from Hadash (an Arab-Jewish party, the full name of which is The Democratic Front for Peace and Equality) speak out consistently on the matter, declaring publicly that they will not be the ones to prevent putting an end to the rightist government. Their message is very clear: If the election results make it possible, they will join a blocking majority to enable and support a non-right-wing government.

According to MK Yousef Jabareen of Hadash, their constituency will support this move under certain circumstances. Of significance to this discussion is the fact that the participation by Hadash in a blocking majority during the second Rabin government was led at the time by Tawfiq Zayyad, a distinguished and respected national figure among Arab citizens. This creates support in principle for the process and will make it easier for Arab politicians to tread the same ground again, given suitable circumstances. Jabareen's view is that the realities of an extreme right-wing government under Netanyahu oblige the Arab public to pursue responsible decision making. These are the conditions he believes must be the basis for negotiations about joining a blocking majority: A government that accords full equality for Arab citizens, including reparative affirmative action; that will work to end the occupation based on the 1967 borders, under a clear timetable; and that will guarantee the Arab parties a real ability to exert their influence on decision making, especially in relation to the status of the Arab public and to the question of peace.

MK Ahmad Tibi, who heads the Taal party, was interviewed at length by the Calcalist in February 2019, and declared himself ready to join a blocking major-

ity to prevent another government headed by Netanyahu. The key conditions he sets are: Extensive budgetary allocations for Arab towns, including for housing; an effective struggle against violence in Arab communities; recognition of the unrecognised Bedouin villages in the Negev; annulment of the Nation-State Law; and the appointment of an MK from one of the Arab parties to the chairmanship of the Knesset Finance Committee.

MK Abd Al Hakeem Haj Yahya of Raam (the Islamic Movement's southern branch) said in September 2017 that he supported a political partnership with the left to achieve a change of government and these positions align with the position traditionally taken by the party. The Balad party takes the opposite position, but they are in the minority among the Arab public. A recent survey from November 2018 suggested that 64% of the Arab public support the idea of the Arab parties' joining the government; 80% think that the Arab parties should support the government from the outside in exchange for fairer budgets.

The idea that Arab MKs can't be partners in a process like this was reinforced by the Joint List's decision not to sign a surplus-votes agreement with Meretz in the 2015 elections. The conclusion however, is unwarranted, because it fails to take into account the peculiar circumstances then prevailing, just a short time after the formation of the Joint List. The opposition expressed by part of the list, the absence of an orderly decision making mechanism, and other special circumstances gave rise to a situation whereby signing the agreement could have led to the dismantling of the Joint List when it had only just been created. The crucial individuals in favour of signing the agreement understandably felt that doing so was not worthwhile if it were to precipitate the dismantling of the partnership only just established. But that's not a sign of things to come. In an October 2017 radio interview, MK Ahmad Tibi said that not signing the surplus-votes agreement with Meretz had been a mistake. And Joint List chairman MK Ayman Odeh has already said unequivocally, more than once, that not signing the agreement was a mistake that would not be repeated.

Bottom line, at least three of the four parties representing Arab citizens are expected to support joining such a blocking majority under certain conditions. A thorough understanding of Arab politics leads to the conclusion that, should the votes of Arab members of Knesset be required to form a government of the centre and left that would unseat the right wing government, most of those

votes would be forthcoming.

The position of the Jewish Left and Centre

Within the Jewish left and centre, there is strong disagreement on this subject. Meretz unequivocally supports such a step, and Labor tends to support it. There are, however, many opponents within the new centre party, Blue and White. Some among the Labor leadership and even more among the leaders of the centrist parties are still deluding themselves that they will be able to form a government with 61 Knesset seats without the Arabs. Yet this posture is hard to fathom, at least considering the balance of power in the current Knesset, where the leftist and centrist parties (including Kulanu which may or may not join such a government) have a total of 50 seats. Even after the announcement of the Attorney General's decision to indict the prime minister, and following the meteoric rise of Gantz and Lapid's new party in the polls, the polls as of early March give the centre and left parties (including Kulanu but excluding the ultra-Orthodox parties) only 51 seats.

Worth bearing in mind is that in the last forty years, the left has held power only twice, and both times Arab citizens played a significant role in the victory: It was their representatives who supported the second Rabin government. In 1999 too, when there was a direct election for Prime Minister as well as for the Knesset, Arab votes provided the numbers that put Ehud Barak ahead of Netanyahu. Hence many from the left and some of the leadership of the centre understand very well that the present government cannot be replaced unless Arab citizens are part of the new government's base of support.

Rabin wanted to remain prime minister; he had no option except Arab support

A few years ago, in an interview I conducted with former Labor MK Moshe Shahal, we discussed a series of meetings he had attended in the 1990s with Hadash chairman Tawfiq Zayyad, during which they forged the understandings which in July 1992 became the basis of Hadash support for the Rabin government. When I asked him how super-security-oriented Rabin had agreed to a minority government reliant on the Arabs, he replied: 'Rabin wanted to remain Prime Minister, and he had no other option except Arab support.'

The possibility thus exists that after the April 2019 or future elections, circumstances could push the head of the largest party in the centre-left bloc into such a partnership.

Thus far, however, playing the hand dealt by Prime Minister Netanyahu with his accusations about their intention to rely on Arab MKs as their base of support for forming a government, the Blue and White party has refrained from any reference whatever to a possible obstructive bloc with the Arabs.

If the only way though, that Gantz or another future leader in the centre-left bloc can be prime minister turns out to be adding the Arabs to his government's base of support – whether because Likud declines to join their government, because they are politically pressured not to form a national unity government with Likud, or they decide to do something substantive vis-à-vis the Palestinians – the chances are that he will follow Rabin's path and invite the Arabs to join a blocking majority in support of the government.

The outlines of the partnership between the Zionist left and the Arabs during the second Rabin administration, over twenty years ago, must now become the minimum objective for a political partnership allowing the formation of a new centre-left government and perhaps laying the foundations to enable the Arab leadership to join the coalition. Bear in mind that such a partnership, which need not be conditioned on first bridging the deep ideological gaps between the Zionist left and centre and the Arab leadership, can still determine the objectives which the government should be pursuing and what it must refrain from doing. That sort of functional agreement is certainly possible.

Call to Action

In order to push ahead with this, the relevant stakeholders should not wait for the elections or the day after. The notion that removing the current government is impossible has generated a sense of despair among all three of the potential partners and could well lower the turnout on election day, especially among Arabs. Lower turnout could mean the loss of some seats for the Jewish-centre-left-Arab bloc, a failure to prevent a new rightist government, and a missed opportunity for the kind of positive process that could have followed the election. To seize the opportunity for real change, concrete steps must be taken

immediately to encourage the idea on both sides that an alternate scenario is both possible and desirable.

Here, then, is a call to action: Political activists, thinkers and doers, those in civil society, academia and from the political world, must begin work on creating a public atmosphere supportive of this option. They should demand that the leadership on both sides promote it, and should begin writing about it without delay, describing how this political partnership would look: What are the conditions for supporting a government from the outside? Different versions of a potential agreement should be drafted to address different scenarios, including an agreement to outline the dimensions of support from the outside for a centre-left government as well as the conditions for joining the coalition (even though the latter is a very low-probability scenario).

The field of relations between Jewish and Arab citizens is full of ideas, including in writing, about the existing situation and potential final agreements addressing the relationships and the regional situation. The existing documents, however, do not address the crucial matter of political partnerships that could enable the establishment of a government in Israel that would eventually secure an end to the occupation and stabilize these relationships in a positive way.

Thus far, various figures among the Arab leadership have proposed different requirements: the revocation of recently passed discriminatory legislation like the Nation-State Law; real steps to advance equality for Arab citizens, including an end to home demolitions in the Negev; expansion of the jurisdictional areas of Arab towns; significant steps to reduce discriminatory budgeting; and the appointment of Arabs to head Knesset committees. This is about taking steps that are real and substantial from both a practical and a symbolic standpoint, and they are partially implementable immediately. Moreover, the Arab leadership will naturally also demand that serious negotiations be started with the Palestinians, en route to ending the occupation.

Demands such as these, although challenging for the Jewish left and centre, do not contradict the centre-left worldview, so it is reasonable to anticipate a positive response that will assure the support of most of the Arab Knesset members for the new government. And as long as the conditions are met, most of the Arab public will also support this – exactly as they did for the Rabin government.

The political leadership of the Jewish centre-left and of the Arabs must do their part to promote the atmosphere required to breathe life into this partnership after the elections. They will need to speak out strongly to counter voices in both the Jewish and Arab public that try to portray supporters of this idea as politically weak and insufficiently nationalistic.

But even now, especially now, while Prime Minister Netanyahu is leading a no-holds-barred campaign trumpeting the “danger” of such a partnership, the level-headed and responsible leadership on both sides can and should pave the way for a successful working partnership. The leadership of the centrist parties, and of Labor and Meretz and the Arab parties, must move to establish a mechanism to press ahead with thinking and discussion about this, and the party memberships must start pressuring their leaders to act. It is important to create quiet agreements about non-participation in the delegitimisation of the other side, and about refraining from attacking the other side in a way that delegitimises a future partnership. As a trust-building measure, the leadership of the centre and left must avoid supporting any step designed to disqualify any Arab Knesset member or faction and must actively and consistently oppose the attack that the present government is leading against Arab citizens. Regrettably, the new centrist party, Blue and White, decided in March 2019 to support the disqualification of the Arab list Balad-Raam from competing in the upcoming elections for the Knesset (a decision that was later overturned by the High Court of Justice). Undoubtedly this unworthy manoeuvre reduces the chances of creating such a partnership, and serious confidence-building steps will be required on the part of Blue and White if they eventually decide to form such partnership after the election.

There is no alternative

Given all of the foregoing, a functional political alliance along the lines proposed here will necessarily be a complicated and difficult process on both sides: For the Arabs, it won't be easy to go from being constantly in the opposition to supporting the government, and there are forces in Arab society that will attack such an alliance. On the other side, having become much stronger in recent years, the right will unleash a firestorm against a government that allies with the Arabs, since the delegitimization of Arabs by the regime in power is one of the big political achievements of the right. The streets will be full of demonstra-

tors and the Shin Bet will need to protect the prime minister very well this time.

Perhaps the prospects for such an alliance to come about are not bright. But for those who hesitate I would ask – what’s the alternative? In practical terms, what do you propose to do in order to prevent the continuation of right-wing rule, which is corrupting the country, severely damaging the foundations of democracy, leading to ever more violent confrontations with the Palestinians under occupation, destroying the relations between citizens, and liable finally to drown us in blood? There is only one way to prevent this nightmare: To establish a reasonable, rational political partnership between the Jewish left and centre and Arab citizens, one that will enable the government of Israel to try, again, to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and give all our children hope and a future in this land.

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The article, translated from the Hebrew by Deb Reich, appeared originally in Hebrew and Arabic in September 2018 in “Achievable Alliances” edited by Amir Fakhoury and published by the Research Center of the School for Peace at Neve Shalom~Wahat al-Salam. It has been updated to cover the recent developments of the April 2019 election campaign. Ron Gerlitz is the Co-Executive Director of Sikkuy, The Association for Civic Equality in Israel; the opinions expressed here are his own.



IT'S BASIC MATH. TO WIN, THE ISRAELI CENTRE-LEFT NEEDS THE ARAB CITIZENS OF ISRAEL

JOEL BRAUNOLD

Two-thirds of the Arab public want to see their representatives sitting in government. If the Israeli Centre-Left is ever to return to power, it should too.

Israeli elections are fundamentally about parliamentary blocs. Whilst there is some excitement this time around that there could be an alternative to Netanyahu as Prime Minister, the chance of a real change in policy or direction by the Israeli government is stymied by the lack of realistic coalition partners that Benny Gantz, should he win, would be able to attract.

Since the election of Ehud Barak, the centre and Left in Israel has chosen to try and win power without a central pillar of their coalition. When Barak decided that a majority of Israelis was not good enough, but he needed a majority of Jewish Israelis he created a precedent that not only was morally dubious, but strategically disastrous.

Israel's electoral system accords significant power to small parties. Often driven by fragments of society, these groups can at times play kingmaker. There are two groups who could do this: The Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox and the Arab citizens of Israel. Both communities have particular concerns. Both communities represent the poorest of Israel.

United Torah Judaism (UTJ) has received between 5-7 seats and has used their power to ensure hundreds of millions of dollars goes to their schools, and that they hold a monopoly of power on issues key to their base. UTJ have little to say about issues of war and peace and the right has been willing to accept almost any condition to keep them in the coalition.

The Arab Joint list received 13 seats in the last election. On average, the Arab parties generate 11-13 seats despite the fact that their turn out in national elec-

tions has been depressed since Barak's decision to exclude them from government on the basis of their ethnicity.

Arab citizens of Israel are the most pro-peace constituency within the country, constantly voting at 20/30 points higher than Jews on their willingness to compromise and accept the Clinton parameters. Delegitimising their voices is crucial in order for right to stay in power, regardless of who heads the government.

Bibi's last minute plea in the 2015 elections, that the Arabs were 'voting in droves', was the opening shot of a four year effort to ensure that the Arab 'otherness' prevented their ability to foster any meaningful link up with the Jewish left.

From the Nation State law to the Nakba law, the aim has been to ensure that the Arab narrative was cast outside the bounds of acceptable discourse and to tar and feather any who would seek to work with them. After the municipal elections when Haifa's Mayor Einat Kalisch-Rotem offered Raja Za'atara of the joint list the deputy mayor position, a firestorm ensued, with the Prime Minister and Interior Minister attempting everything in their power to thwart the arrangement.

In the nascent campaign for the 21st Knesset, Bibi has used the specter of Benny Gantz relying on Tibi's votes to form a government as a tool of delegitimation. Fear of the Arabs coming to the polls won Bibi the last election; he hopes that playing the race card again will keep him in the top job.

Many I have spoken to over the years point to rightward trends in Israeli society and feel that if you can't beat those using a narrative of fear, you should instead join them. The theory is that by appealing to Jewish fears of the Arab other, one can win the day against the annexationist right. The left's idea has been that the desire for a Jewish majority – if wrapped in the rhetoric of fear – can help the separationist center capture right-wing voters who would rather give up land than accept living amongst more Arabs.

If you believed that peace was but an election away, I could perhaps see the strategic logic despite the moral cost. Yet looking at the attitudes of Palestinians and Israelis, and the lack of any discussion of peace or two states in the cur-

rent election campaign, an agreement is unlikely to be secured during the next Knesset, as none of the necessary pre-requisites are in place, and there are deep levels of hostility and mistrust.

The Arab citizens of Israel could be the link between Israel and the Palestinians, able to sooth the fear and mistrust that decades of failure has generated. In order for them to be able to play that role however, they need to be respected and included.

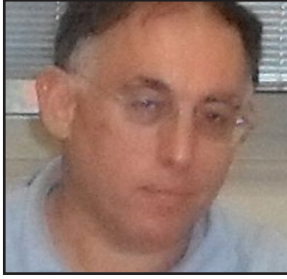
In municipal partnerships the bonds between the Arab community and the Jewish community are forged, as grassroots engagement builds a shared society from the ground up. This essential work takes time and patience.

We are not there yet.

Despite all the analysis, campaigning and electioneering, the laws of electoral mathematics are unchanged. There is no path to a centre-Left government in Israel without some iteration of a coalition or a supply arrangement with the Arab bloc, something that the right has continued to make impossible in the current reality.

Gantz could win in April, and still be faced with coalition agreements committing him to a situation whereby progress on the peace process is as remote as ever.

If that is to change, a sincere commitment must be made to bring the Arab citizens of Israel into the political equations that determine government formation. According to the latest polls conducted by the Abraham Initiatives, two thirds of the Arab public want to see their representatives sitting in government. That is a base that can and must be built off, if we are ever to see the centre-Left's return to power.



WHY THE ISRAELI LABOR PARTY IS DYING

ERIC LEE

Why has the Israeli Labor Party failed to return to power for over 20 years? Eric Lee points to the failure of the Oslo Accords to make Israelis feel more secure, the inability of the party to convince working class people to vote left, and the decline of social democratic parties in Western Europe as a whole.

The Israeli Labor Party is predicted to win fewer seats in the Knesset in the elections on 9 April than at any other time in its history. There is even the possibility, albeit a slim one, that it will disappear entirely by not reaching the 3.25 per cent threshold. As I write these words, in the first week of March, all three recent public opinion polls show the party receiving just six Knesset seats – or about 5 per cent of the vote. Of the 11 parties expected to win seats in the Knesset, seven would have larger factions than Labor.

This is happening despite the results of the party's recent primaries, in which 34,000 members voted – an exceptionally good turnout. They chose an appealing list of candidates, mostly female and youthful, including social protest leaders Itzik Shmuli and Stav Shaffir. For a moment it seemed the party might rebound a bit in the polls, but this was not the case.

In a desperate attempt to stave off electoral disaster, efforts were made at the last minute to merge Labor with its smaller left-wing rival, Meretz, but these failed. Now the two parties together are projected to receive half as many seats as Labor won (in coalition with Tzipi Livni's party, 'Hatnuah') just four years ago.

Considering that a generation ago, this was a party which had completely dominated political life in Israel since independence — and before — this is an extraordinary development.

In elections to the first Knesset back in 1949, Labor's forerunner Mapai managed to win almost 36 per cent of the vote. The left-wing Zionist Mapam was the second largest party with almost 15 per cent. The Communists had 3.5 per cent. Together, the three self-proclaimed socialist parties won 69 Knesset seats.

Labor's dominance continued in one form or another until the 1977 Likud victory, when Menachem Begin became prime minister, and the party has never really recovered from that defeat. Labor was in power a few times in the past four decades, most notably when Yitzhak Rabin led it to victory in the 1992 elections, and the result was the Oslo accords. But Labor's victory over the Likud in 1999 was its last; it has not won an election in the last 20 years.

Ask around, and people will say that the problem is that Labor has picked the wrong leaders. The current one, Avi Gabbay, is a case in point. Gabbay is a former CEO of one of Israel's largest companies and more recently, served as a minister in the Netanyahu government.

According to polls, he's leading the party from second place (with 24 Knesset seats, representing 20 per cent of the vote) to oblivion. Obviously, he was not a great choice. And yet it seems that each leader Labor chooses, whether they go for the ideologically correct or the one expected to be popular, the populist or the general or the businessman, it doesn't matter. The decline of the party is relentless.

I would argue that the problem is not this or that leader. Instead, the decline of Israeli social democracy (and I include Meretz in this picture) is part of a process that has been occurring across the world over many years.

The party which historically embodied the values of social democracy, and to which all other parties looked for leadership for many decades, was the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD). The SPD was destroyed by the Nazis, but came back to life after the war, winning several election victories and helping to transform Germany into the modern, democratic state it has become. But today, the SPD seems to be in terminal decline, suffering one electoral defeat after another. Few expect it to return to government any time soon.

The decline of French social democracy is even starker. The election of François

Hollande in May 2012 was the last significant victory the party won. From then on, it has declined into nothingness. In the 2017 election, its candidate Benoît Hamon won just 6 per cent of the vote — and he later quit the party.

Social democratic parties throughout the Nordic region, and in the Netherlands, Belgium and Italy, have faced similar challenges and defeats. The organisation which unites the various social democratic parties, the 150-year old Socialist International, has split into two, and seems to be in terminal decline itself.

So is the decline of the Israeli Labor Party and that of the social democratic parties around the globe a coincidence? Of course not.

Tolstoy wrote that ‘all happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way’. This is certainly true of the ‘family’ of social democracy. Each party has had its own problems, including poor choices of leaders.

But there also seems to be a pattern that might explain why so many of those parties have declined so precipitously in recent years.

In the beginning, a century or more ago, all those parties were basically labour parties. They represented not so much a specific platform or policies, but a particular social class. You voted for a social democratic or labour party because you identified as part of the working class. You believed that whatever policies the party would stand for would represent your interests.

But over many years, and after many years in power, most of those parties made compromises with reality (as they saw it) which weakened the link between party and class. This has been particularly true in the years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, when general acceptance of what has been called ‘neo-liberalism’ has severely hurt the parties of the moderate Left. Those parties have often led the way with austerity budgets, privatisation of public services, and costly bail-out programmes for the finance sector. Their natural constituencies — the working classes — have felt, and in fact were, left behind.

In Israel the working class, or a large chunk of it, has for a long time now felt estranged from social democratic parties. It was working class support that propelled Menachem Begin to victory in 1977 and his party, the Likud, has continued to enjoy the support of working class people and the poor despite its

record of neo-liberal economic policies that have widened the social gap and contributed to an increase in poverty. Many voters from the poorest neighbourhoods continue to support both religious parties and parties of the far Right. There are parallels between this phenomenon and what American writer Thomas Frank discussed in his 2004 book ‘What’s the matter with Kansas?’ In the old language of the Left, this is what would have been called ‘false consciousness.’

In Israel there are specific reasons for this, first and foremost the ongoing conflict with the Palestinians and the Arab world. Many Israelis define ‘Left’ as meaning pro-Palestinian and ‘Right’ as meaning tough on security. The failure of the Oslo Accords to make Israelis feel more secure and to move closer to an end to the conflict has done much to undermine confidence in Left parties (Labor and Meretz in particular) which were closely identified with Oslo. In addition, the existence of a number of religious political parties, and the never-ending squabbles in the country about secularism versus religious coercion, mean that many voters are unlikely to even consider their own economic interests, instead voting their religious beliefs.

There can be no clearer expression of this than the decision by the leader of the Histadrut (the country’s trade union federation), Avi Nissenkorn, to run as a candidate for the new ‘Israeli Resilience’ list, led by former army commander Benny Gantz. For decades, the leader of the Histadrut would have been a loyal member of the Labor Party. Some former Histadrut leaders like Amir Peretz remain Labor loyalists, though others in the past defected from the party. The historic link between Labor and the unions has been broken.

In some countries, parties have sprung up to the Left of the traditional social democratic ones and have had a measure of success, such as Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece. In other countries, social democratic parties (or currents within larger parties) have done well by choosing to return to more traditional values. The Bernie Sanders campaign in 2016 and again today is a good example of the kind of success social democrats can have when they offer a clear alternative to late capitalism and are unafraid to speak about social class (Sanders made very good use of the idea of the ‘99 per cent’ vs. the ‘billionaire class’.)

And in the UK, Jeremy Corbyn (whatever one thinks of his views on Israel and other issues) clearly did very well by representing a return to traditional La-

bour values, abandoning the 'Third Way' advocated by Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. The British Labour Party is today the largest political party in Europe, due in large part to its abandonment of the Blairite agenda and its embrace of traditional left-wing values.

There does not seem to be anything like this happening at the moment in Israel. The more left-wing elements of Labor have not come forward to take over the party and return it to its roots. And parties to the left of Labor, such as Da'am, remain marginalised.

In Israeli politics, which seems to be completely focused on personalities rather than ideas, more so now than ever before, the notion of a political party based on social class, representing the interests of those who vote for it, seems quaint.

But based on the experience of social democratic parties elsewhere, it would seem that becoming once again parties of the working class, representing the 99 per cent and not the billionaires, may turn out to be the only way forward.



YASHAR: A NEW GRASSROOTS ISRAELI POLITICAL MOVEMENT

ERAN EZTION

Ernan Etzion is the former Deputy Head of the National Security Council and Head of the Policy Planning Division in the Foreign Ministry. In this conversation with Fathom, he tells us why he has established a new political party, Yashar, and why he believes it can be the future of Israeli democracy.

The crisis of trust

During my 25 years in the foreign ministry I was privy to much of the political dynamic between political echelon and the professional echelon. It struck me that regardless of who was Prime Minister – and I served during the time of Sharon, Olmert and Netanyahu – there were many similarities in how governments operated and that the relationship between the government and its citizens was broken. Essentially, I saw a profound disconnect between the decision-making process and the wishes of the citizens.

This was brought home particularly sharply during the mass social protests of 2011. As both a citizen and senior civil servant I expected the government to treat those concerns with seriousness and respect, and to respond to the genuine needs that were expressed by the protestors. But the instinct was to squash the citizenry in order to maintain the political status quo. I came to understand that while this was a Netanyahu government, it probably wouldn't have been significantly different under someone else. This was very troubling to me and these experiences led me to eventually creating Yashar.

A structural global crisis

This gap between citizens and elected officials is not just an Israeli phenomenon but a global one. A deep structural crisis is being experienced by democracies around the world – in the UK, throughout Europe, the US and even in

Japan and South Korea. Essentially, the nature of the crisis is a collapse of trust between the political system – built around political lobbies, big money and special interest groups – and the state's citizens. Citizens have justifiably lost trust in politicians. This has been the case for decades, but today technology and social networks have allowed us to be more aware of the situation. The product of these two trends – the rigged political system on the one hand and the global political awakening on the other – has created a new zeitgeist marked by deep mistrust of the political class. This is the most critical driving force of our time. And Yashar was created to deal with this structural problem of disconnect by trying to establish a real, genuine, fundamental, enduring connection between the members of our party (who are regular members of the public) and parliament.

Building a solution: The Yashar political start up

We need to reinvent parliament in a way that will solve the crisis of trust. But this has been done nowhere, there is not a blueprint exist of a real representative parliament to follow. In light of this, we decided to start smaller and focus on the level of the political party. We created a unique application which connects all party members with all its representatives. Each member commits to our platform which is liberal-democratic in nature, and in contrast to other parties takes clear positions on all critical issues. And once you become a member you can vote and influence how your party's representatives vote and act throughout the term of the next Israeli Knesset. Under no circumstances will Yashar's elected officials vote against the will of our party members. Our promise to our party members is we won't break the promises that we make. And with this we solve the issue of mistrust.

What is likely in the 2019 elections?

Yashar identified two years ago that the overarching mistrust that had caused the collapse of established parties in France and Germany would happen in Israel too. This has proven to be accurate, with the Israeli Labour party being a case in point. Other well-established parties on the left and right are also struggling to pass the threshold.

One main issue on which the election is being fought is Netanyahu himself,

and the results will be a validation (or not) of Netanyahu and a verdict on his corruption charges. I believe Netanyahu will be forced to leave office very shortly after the elections. It's certainly clear he won't be able to serve his entire term. In this sense, he is running as a ghost candidate, yet he is acting like a fully-fledged candidate and unfortunately everyone is responding accordingly. Ultimately though, the main question Israeli voters will need to decide is 'Netanyahu in or out?' The jury is still out – there are too many unknowns, and anything is still possible.

Another component of the election is that Netanyahu's main rivals, Blue/White, have created a party which is essentially all of Netanyahu's policy (on Iran, the Palestinians, the economy) just without Netanyahu. Gantz and Lapid are trying to court right wing voters. There is also a chance, especially if Blue/White stays in opposition, that they will divide into three parts. I believe the most realistic scenario will be a Likud and Blue/White national unity government, with the only question being who will be form it and who will join it. Either way, it will be a continuation of Netanyahu's policies, which is not good news for anyone.

Passing the Electoral Threshold

In Israel the threshold is 3.25 per cent. That is not easy for a new party, but we think it's doable. Yashar believes that because we have a new and innovative model, we will be able to attract certain sectors and constituencies that no one else will be able to reach. Firstly, we are aiming to recruit the 1.5 million Israelis who didn't vote in 2015, many of whom have lost trust in politicians. Second, the 500,000 young voters who are voting for the first time. Many of them are excited about our model and application and its combination of technology and politics. Third, there is much interest in the Yashar model in the Arab population. While they are being attacked and delegitimised, the secular, educated younger generation is very much looking to integrate economically and socially and Yashar offers them this opportunity. Fourth, certain segments of the Russian-speaking community amongst whom more than 500,000 are not considered 'legitimate Jews' by the Rabbinical establishment and who have difficulty marrying. What Yashar offers them in terms of the separation of religion and state, civil marriage etc, means we believe a lot of them may vote for us.

The whole idea isn't just to go into Knesset but to change the system. But I

firmly believe that this type of model – binding party membership with party representatives in parliament through a combination of technology and ideology that ensures the members can trust and influence the votes of its representatives – has already begin to work. In Italy, the 5 Star Movement won the elections, and Podemos in Spain won 20 per cent of votes using a similar model. Moreover, 19 political parties have sprung in the last four years in Europe using similar models. We see one model for the future of democracy in Hungary, Poland and elsewhere. But our model is an alternative; it represents the optimistic future of democracy. And those who seek enlightened real democracy should see this model as the way forward.



THE FAR RIGHT IN ISRAELI POLITICS

COLIN SHINDLER

Professor Colin Shindler argues that pragmatism by a Right wing government has often led to an ideological schism towards the far Right, and evaluates the recent merger between Jewish Home, National Union and Jewish Power that was ‘mid-wifed’ by Prime Minister Netanyahu.

The genesis of the Likud

Since the election of the Likud in 1977, the party has led government for 28 out of those 42 years. In addition it partnered Labour in the rotation government (1984-1988). Likud was only truly out of power when Ariel Sharon’s Centre-Right Kadima ruled between November 2005 until February 2009 and during the six years of Labour-led administrations – Rabin (1992-1995), Peres (1995-1996), Barak (1999-2001).

The so-called father of the Zionist Right, Vladimir Jabotinsky, had been the head of the Revisionist Zionists, the Betar youth group and the Irgun Zvai Leumi in the 1930s. All had different political agendas. The charismatic Jabotinsky was adept at addressing different audiences in different voices. With his death in August 1940, there was no restraining hand. The Irgun split into two factions – one which wished to continue the war against the British, the other which wished to fight with the British against the Nazis. The former, led initially by Avraham Stern, emerged after his death as Lehi (the Fighters for the Freedom of Israel). Yitzhak Shamir became the chief operations officer. The other faction of the Irgun was taken over in 1943 by a leading Betar maximalist from Brest-Litovsk, Menahem Begin, who disagreed with Jabotinsky on fundamental questions such as the armed struggle and national liberation as well as the wisdom of negotiating with the British. On the day following Israel’s declaration of independence in May 1948, Begin announced that he was following a

political path – and that the Irgun would become the Herut movement.

Opposing Camp David

By 1973, Begin had painstakingly constructed an umbrella organisation, the Likud, during three decades of opposition to Labour hegemony. It consisted of Herut loyalists, general Zionists and defectors from Labour. Once in government, Begin's grand coalition of the Right began to disintegrate as soon as political decisions had to be made. The Foreign Minister, Moshe Dayan, and the Defence Minister, Ezer Weizmann, resigned in the aftermath of the Camp David accord, when it became apparent that Begin had abandoned pragmatism and was uninterested in resolving the Palestinian question – he only wished to achieve a bilateral agreement with Egypt.

Even so, within Herut's ranks, there had previously been dissension and disquiet about Begin's willingness to return territory to Egypt and to consider Palestinian national rights. Only 57 per cent of Herut members of the Knesset voted for Camp David while loyalists such as Yitzhak Shamir and Moshe Arens refused to side with Begin. Long time comrades from the Irgun and Poland began to oppose Begin. Haim Landau, from Krakow, originally brought into the cabinet as a safe pair of hands, proved to be a rallying point for Begin's critics.

In March 1979, following the signing of the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty, the former president of Tel Aviv University, Yuval Ne'eman, announced that he was forming a new party. Tehiya became the first party of the far Right. It won only three seats in the 1981 election and was strongly supported by the West Bank settlers. However, its establishment formulated a pattern such that whenever the Right in government had to make a pragmatic decision, there would often be an ideological schism towards the far Right.

During the 1980s, the possibility of resolving the Palestinian question catalysed the formation of other far Right parties such as Tsomet, Morasha, and Moledet – which was enthusiastic about transferring Palestinian Arabs out of the territory. All wanted the expansion of settlements and the annexation of part – and often all – of the West Bank. Ideologically these parties traced their origins back not only to the Likud, but also to Labour and to the National Religious Party.

The road to power

By the early 1990s, such far Right parties sat in Yitzhak Shamir's government and were supported by Ariel Sharon as a means of bolstering his own opposition to the Likud leadership. This proved to be a feature of subsequent Likud governments. When Netanyahu became Likud leader in 1992, Sharon attacked him from the far Right. When Sharon became prime minister a decade later, Netanyahu moved to criticise him from a similar position. Yet all Likud prime ministers, Begin, Shamir, Sharon and Netanyahu feared being outmanoeuvred by small parties on the far Right.

However, the far Right grew in strength due mainly to the rise of Palestinian Islamism and its propagation of suicide bombing in the wake of dashed hopes for peace.

As soon as there was any semblance of violence in the Middle East, the Israeli electorate accelerated to the Right. The combined effect of Hamas in power in Gaza, the advance of Iran towards the northern border, the Syrian tragedy and the general instability in the Arab world persuaded many Israelis to place their trust in the far Right, in figures such as Naftali Bennett and Avigdor Lieberman. Any space for dialogue with Palestinians has been closed off.

Netanyahu recognised this situation and brought the far Right into his various administrations while practicing the politics of stagnation. Such stasis has been enhanced by the political disarray in the US and Europe. The economic woes of the West have been broadly avoided in Israel – although the gap between the haves and the have-nots has widened.

Such stability amidst international unrest has allowed the far Right to use its position in government to attack bastions of democracy such as an independent judiciary, free debate in academia and artistic endeavour in the arts world. It has even castigated the Jabotinsky wing of the Likud for its liberalism while purporting to be the heirs of this founder of the national camp. It has criticised Netanyahu for not accelerating the settlement drive on the West Bank.

Its presence in government has proved to be an obstacle to any pragmatic political initiative by the Likud such as those conducted by Begin at Camp David

(1978) and Shamir at Madrid (1991). Netanyahu's attempts at forge agreements – Hebron (1997) and Wye Plantation (1998) – brought him opprobrium both from within the Likud and the far Right and defeat at the polls in 1999. He took to heart the lessons learned from his near political demise.

Integrating the Kahanists

Netanyahu's isolationist mindset together with the growing power of the far Right has psychologically affected the public mood whereby moral behaviour in public life counts for little and spiritual leaders remain silent on corrupt practices. There was indeed no sense of shame within the Likud and sections of the Israeli Right that Otzma Yehudit, the latest reincarnation of Kahanism, should join the Habayit Hayehudi/Tkuma list. However clearly Netanyahu did not bargain for an eruption of outrage from many orthodox figures. In a Shabbat sermon, Rabbi Benny Lau, compared the views of Otzma Yehudit to those of Nazism – and has subsequently been served with a NIS 100,000 lawsuit for slander from one of its candidates in the election.

In a political sense, Netanyahu believed that he should be the midwife of this 'Union of Right Wing Parties' (URWP) in order to cement his ability to form a future coalition with the far Right. Another far Right group, Ahi, will run with the Likud. Eli Ben-Dahan, a former deputy Defence Minister, known for remarks about Palestinians – 'they are not human' – is number 28 on the Likud list. Zehut, yet another far Right group, led by Moshe Feiglin, once a major activist in the Likud, promises to return the IDF to 'its original pre-Oslo mentality'. Feiglin was banned in March 2008 from entering Britain by the then Home Secretary, Jacqui Smith, for fear of provoking hatred which could lead to 'inter-community violence'.

Following the Attorney General's decision to indict Netanyahu for bribery, fraud and breach of trust in three criminal cases on 28 February, it is likely that the Likud will lose support amongst voters and fall further behind Benny Gantz's Kachol Lavan (Blue and White). Preliminary polls suggest that Netanyahu's indictment will also increase support for far Right parties, the URWP and Naftali Bennett's HaYamin HaHadash (The New Right).

The problem for all parties in the 2019 election – outside of the two major blocs

of the Likud and Kachol Lavan – whether Right or Left, is whether they can pass the threshold of 3.25 per cent. This is the great unknown. The far Right may succeed while parties such Meretz, Gesher and Kulanu may falter. If all the far Right parties including the haredim do cross the line, then they may have slightly greater representation in the Knesset than previously – albeit through a redistribution of seats due to splits and coalescence. If the Centre and Left parties fail to cross the line, then Gantz will find it hard to form a coalition. As in 2009, when Tzipi Livni's Kadima attained the greatest number of seats, the far Right, preferred the loser in the contest, Netanyahu – the same may happen again a decade later if the far Right, fortified by the followers of Rabbi Meir Kahane, effectively holds the balance of power.



THE ELECTIONS AND THE TERRITORIES

YISRAEL MEDAD

With only one week to go until election day, the fate of the territories has barely been mentioned. Yisrael Medad explores why, suggesting that most Israeli Jews now support ‘the idea that Jews belong in Judea and Samaria and believe that all or most of them should stay’. Indeed, after a Likud victory, pressure for partial annexation may be brought to bear in the coalition talks.

With only seven days left in the election campaign for the 21st Knesset, the future of the territories of Judea and Samaria (the West Bank) has been almost a non-issue since the Knesset dissolved itself at the end of December. Even when it finally got a bit of public attention, it was due to the decision of US President Donald Trump to announce on 25 March that the US ‘recognises that the Golan Heights are part of the State of Israel’ and, understandably, questions were asked about whether this would affect policy towards the territories in the West Bank.

To date, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has made only one high-profile visit to a West Bank community, my home village of Shiloh, (although even then it was only to the archaeological Tel with former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee rather than to the community itself.) He did make shiva / consolation visits to the families of West Bank terror victims, as did President Reuven Rivlin. And he also conducted a business meeting with heads of regional and municipal councils. But this was a closed session and was more a report on Netanyahu’s government’s achievements in resettling Jews in their national homeland. A perfunctory summary statement referred to the prime minister saying he was ‘working on empowering Israel in the arena of security, economics and diplomacy’.

Why has the issue of the territories, with over 450,000 Jewish residents, been

so little discussed?

Are settlements now within the consensus?

One possible reasoning for the low-profile is that, quite simply, most of the parties, except for the extreme Left and the Arab lists, all support – whether fully or partially – the idea that Jews belong in Judea and Samaria and believe that all or most of them should stay within blocs or some other arrangement. In other words, from Netanyahu to Benny Gantz, Labor leader Avi Gabbay to New Right leader Naftali Bennett, Jews remaining in their communities is a general consensus item.

While I'm not a fan of surveys – it is often the formulation of the question that influences the results – a Haaretz poll from 5 March found that 42 per cent of Israelis support partial annexation – rather than some vague retention – of the West Bank (a figure that also includes those who support a two-state solution!) According to the poll, 34 per cent support a two-state solution, which only three parties openly promote. Oddly enough, 20 per cent of non-Jews support complete annexation of the West Bank.

Why is this the case? Firstly, Israel has administered the territories for almost 52 years. Not only first-time voters, but a good proportion of their parents have not known any other reality. Secondly, the Arab rejection of any sensible peace arrangement negotiations, their unyielding negation of Jewish national identity and incitement campaigns, and the 'pay-for-slay' terrorism pension support all point to a serious security threat and a sense of uselessness on Israel's part to try to assuage this Arab negativism. Even among many left-of-Centre Israelis, the idea that dismantling communities in the West Bank would solve the conflict (rather than making them feel more ethical and acceptable in liberal and progressive circles), is becoming increasingly difficult to convincingly argue.

Settlement issues and coalition negotiations

This support for settlements exists despite the fact that parties to the right of the Likud have been promoting the extension of partial sovereignty to Area C as well as below-the-surface severe criticism of Netanyahu for reduced construction, removal of several outpost communities and neighbourhoods, and

his perceived failure to confront the lopsided legal obstructionism. Netanyahu's unwillingness to remove the EU-promoted Khan al-Ahmar Bedouin encampment was even an object of ads in the press. All of this means that if the Likud does form the next governing coalition, pressure surrounding these issues will be brought to bear in the coalition talks with the various parties, especially the United Right list. In this respect, observers of Israel's political process need to know that the next election campaign begins on the morrow of the last one.

What could go wrong?

One worry is the potential return to the 'trauma of 1992' when too many right-wing politicians presumed there was a large bank of voters and the dilution of votes between them caused parties to fail to cross the threshold and thus disappear. While that scenario has perhaps been prevented by uniting three separate lists into one (Jewish Home, National Union and Jewish Power), it came at the cost of merging, even if only in a technical bloc, with a party identified as too extreme even for the Yesha Council.

Despite portrayals of West Bank residents as fanatics or worse, the majority of 450,000 Jews in the communities have shunned the very few who engage in direct physical violence against Arabs. The Yesha Council has always pleaded with the police to arrest the very few 'hilltop youth' who may be involved in criminal activities. In fact, proactive educational and social worker programmes have been initiated by several of the larger regional councils to a saner, more ethical and more legal response by these rebellious youth for whom the Jewish Power lure has become enticing. Submerging Jewish Power's candidates within the United Right bloc may prove to be a moderating force on the party and not as others have framed it.

And then there is Moshe Feiglin's Zehut party. If polls are to be believed, from barely scratching the electoral threshold barrier of 3.25 per cent, Feiglin is now showing public support that could gain him between six and seven seats, which would potentially make him a kingmaker for either Netanyahu or Gantz. Feiglin has been reportedly drawing votes from both right-wing and left-wing circles. And in contrast to the leaders of other right-wing and ultra-Orthodox parties, he has specifically not committed to recommending Netanyahu for prime minister. Despite being a resident of Karnei Shomron in the Samaria region, some fear

that his personal animosity to Netanyahu – who all but threw him out of the Likud in the run-up to the 18th Knesset / 2009 elections – may affect his political decisions in who to recommend become the next prime minister. Certainly, his quirkiness and recent political maneuverings are, to use a pun, unsettling for many in the Yesha leadership.



THE NATIONAL-RELIGIOUS CAMP: NO DIRECTION HOME?

SARA HIRSCHHORN

In some ways, the national religious community face the 2019 election without a traditional ideological home. Nevertheless, argues Sara Hirschhorn, the election results are likely to offer more political surety to the constituency than to any other, there being little to suggest any challenge to the settler enterprise or a separation of religion from the public sphere in the coming years.

From the early statehood period, the religious Zionist public reliably voted as a bloc for parties that represented their interests like the Mizrachi, and later, the Mafdal (or National Religious Party), which sat independently of successive secular Zionist governments for several decades. With the election of Menachem Begin and the Likud party in 1977 – which broke nearly 30 years of Labor party dominance of the Israeli Knesset – and certainly after the Camp David Peace Accords with Egypt in 1979, the Mafdal party lost market-share and the religious Zionist movement fragmented into more radical and populist independent parties such as Moledet and Tekuma.

The rise of internal tensions and strategic voting

Since 2008, with the creation of the Ha-Bayit Ha-Yehudi (Jewish Home) party, which represented the amalgamation of Mafdal, Moledet, and Tekuma, religious Zionist voters once again had an electoral ‘home’. Yet, internal tensions within the joint-list, (which saw the almost immediate departure of Moledet and a split between so-called moderates aligned with MK Naftali Bennett and the Tekuma faction led by MK Uri Ariel), put stress on internal party cohesion and caused consternation for voters who were concerned about the party’s agenda.

Meanwhile, the wish to ensure an overall right wing victory also began to impinge on a religious-Zionist public’s purely ideological behaviour at the voting booth. The national religious camp became increasingly worried about the

small margins of stability ‘enjoyed’ by the last several right-wing coalitions led by Benjamin Netanyahu, which relied precipitously on the votes of a narrow majority that could easily be toppled by minor points of disagreement — (especially with the Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox Yahadut Ha-Torah United Torah Judaism party). Their desire to see a more durable government – as well as, ironically, a general sense of confidence that Likud would defend the Greater Israel programme and the wider interests of religion in politics – led some religious Zionists to increasingly shift their voting habits. Instead of risking a left-wing coalition by voting for particularist parties, they began voting strategically for the Prime Minister’s party (as seen in the 2015 campaign where several seats moved from Jewish Home to Likud in the final 48 hours). While stalwart settlement activists and the religious Zionist electorate on both sides of the Green Line often vigorously and publicly discussed whether the Likud was aggressively promoting expansionist policies, preventing terror, or placating the international community with (mostly empty) promises of a peace process, there were clear signs that both internal dysfunction and external debate were undermining the electoral and ideological commitment to Ha-Bayit Ha-Yehudi.

Further divisions, mergers and acquisitions

Yet in these elections, the national religious camp once again no longer has a clear ‘home’. Long-simmering ideological and tactical strife between so-called moderates and radicals within Ha-Bayit Ha-Yehudi led to a split between MKs Bennett and Ayelet Shaked who broke away to form the ‘New Right’ party in December 2018, leaving a smaller Jewish Home comprising mostly of Tekuma members now led by the openly racist and radical MK Bezalel Smotrich. Concerned about the fate of a future right-wing coalition, Netanyahu controversially midwifed an alliance between Ha-Bayit Ha-Yehudi and Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power), a formerly fringe far-right faction comprised mainly of followers of Meir Kahane that did not pass the electoral threshold in 2015, to ensure their lists would make it into the 2019 Knesset, (with promised ministerial seats to Smotrich and his allies.) Some within the national religious camp decried the entry of Jewish Power into the electoral contest, dismissing the party as violent extremists that may well endanger a now mainstream Israeli settler movement and consequently pulling their ballot support for the combined list. Yet, it remains unclear where these voters will shift their votes towards and to what

extent there is a real constituency for the New Right, which has mostly failed to put forward a compelling platform distinguishing itself from the Likud.

An embarrassment of party riches?

Further, it is likely that many national religious voters will continue to vote strategically for the Likud – rather than either of the other two lists – to shore up a right-wing coalition. And in recent weeks, a new dark horse candidate – and former Likud member – Moshe Feiglin and his Zehut (Identity) party have ascended in the polling by campaigning on marijuana legalisation and libertarianism, with voters either unaware of or ambivalent about his platform to abolish the Oslo Accords, require loyalty tests from Palestinian citizens of Israel, promote the population ‘transfer’ of Palestinians, and establish Jewish sovereignty over the Temple Mount). This leaves many wondering whether an ultra-nationalist candidate who was once convicted for sedition against the State of Israel in the 1990s will become a kingmaker in the 2019 elections!

Meanwhile, although all the right-wing parties have portrayed the centre-Left ‘Blue and White’ party as soft on security and settlements, former Chief of Staff Benny Gantz has thus far refused to full-throatedly endorse the two-state solution. Instead, he has ran early campaign ads touting his military record in bombing Gaza in military operations, and ruled out sitting with parties representing Palestinian citizens of Israel in a centre-Left coalition. At the time of writing, a unity government representing Blue and White as well as Likud (with or without Netanyahu) cannot be ruled out.

Suffice to say, settler activists and the religious Zionist electorate on either side of the Green Line will seemingly have an embarrassment of party riches and political spoils in the 2019 Knesset. They are almost guaranteed a good number of seats spread across right-wing parties and will also likely have several representatives holding cabinet level positions. Even a centre-Left coalition or unity government may not necessary threaten their interests.

Nevertheless, this election cycle has exposed much of the ideological tensions and internal divisions within the religious Zionist electorate. First, they are split between so-called moderates and extremists – even if in some cases, the divide is as much about public relations optics than policy options. Second, they seem-

ingly have little faith that their parties alone can carry a coalition and therefore rely on strategic voting for the Likud to improve the chances of a right-leaning government. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the religious Zionist camp has no cohesive identity or committed loyalties at the voting booth and the era of the 'national religious party' has likely come to an end. Nonetheless, in spite of their divisions, the outcome of the 2019 elections will likely only strengthen the hand of the national religious 'tribe' within the State of Israel for the foreseeable future.



THE GROWING POWER OF THE 'INDEPENDENT' ULTRA-ORTHODOX VOTER

GILAD MALACH

Dr. Gilad Malach is head of the ultra-Orthodox program at the Israel Democracy Institute in Jerusalem. In a conversation with Fathom Deputy Editor Calev Ben-Dor, Malach discusses the recent changes that have taken place in ultra-Orthodox society, voting trends within the 'sector', and how the onset of technology is affecting voting patterns.

Calev Ben-Dor: *What size is the ultra-Orthodox population in Israel? And what sort of changes have taken place within ultra-Orthodox society in recent years – what are the big underlying trends?*

Gilad Malach: There are approximately 1 million ultra-Orthodox in Israel, comprising about 12 per cent of the population. Their growth is around 4 per cent each year, in comparison to 1.5 per cent for the rest of Israeli society. Historically, some elements of behaviour among the ultra-Orthodox, such as their low levels of higher education and low participation in the work force, were considered less important because they constituted a small proportion of the population as a whole. But these topics have now become increasingly more important for Israel's future prosperity.

One unique component to Israeli ultra-Orthodoxy – rather than their English or American counterparts – is that most men study religious texts for their entire lives rather than work. In 2003, the ultra-Orthodox male participation in the work force was around 35 per cent (compared to 85 per cent in male population as a whole). And even those who did work often earned less money because their secular education was lower.

However, many changes have taken place over the last 15 years. Children allowances were so high before 2003 that families with seven children received the equivalent of a salary from the government. But cuts in these allowances has

meant that many ultra-Orthodox families are unable afford to rely on the state and have entered into the labour market. Today around 50 per cent of ultra-Orthodox men are working, while the rates for women has also increased. In 2003 just 51 per cent of ultra-Orthodox women worked, whereas today that number is 76 per cent, a similar number to the rest of Israeli society.

CB-D: *If the ultra-Orthodox population is growing at a much faster rate than the rest of Israel, why are the number of seats that United Torah Judaism (UTJ) and Shas are receiving staying the same? Who is voting for these parties and do ultra-Orthodox vote en-masse? Has there been a change?*

GM: For many years, Shas was a much larger party than UTJ. In the 1990s Shas got 17 seats in 1999 but today have seven and they are currently polling four to seven seats. They are in decline. But unlike UTJ, for many years Shas was getting most of its support from non-ultra-Orthodox voters – traditional, religious and some secular Israelis with Mizrachi origins who felt connected to the charismatic Rabbinical leader Ovadya Yosef. When Yosef passed away, Shas’ support fell and it continues to fall. Today most traditionally-religious voters don’t feel they are connected to ultra-Orthodox parties. Rather, they feel they have other options, which are more modern and Israeli that better reflect their identity.

UTJ is faced with a different situation. The mainstream ultra-Orthodox voter group is smaller than it used to be. On the one hand, around 20 per cent of those who identify as ultra-Orthodox say they will not vote for an ultra-Orthodox party. Instead, they vote for right-wing parties. This phenomenon didn’t exist 20 years ago. In addition, there are about 15 per cent who simply boycott elections. This group has recently doubled and is joined by a group known as the ‘Jerusalem faction’. So UTJ have lost voters from some who no longer vote sectorally and from others who boycott elections completely.

Also, since the 1990s more than 1 million people immigrated to Israel, especially from the former Soviet Union, and this has diluted the relative size of the fast growing ultra-Orthodox population.

CB-D: *Because many ultra-Orthodox leaders have passed away, during the municipal elections there was a lot of discussion about whether the influence of ultra-Or-*

thodox Rabbis to tell their population who to vote for had eroded. To what extent is this true, and may the same trends we saw in municipal elections also be applied to national elections?

GM: For years many ultra-Orthodox voters would vote for the party that their Rabbis told them to vote for. However, all the great Rabbis who made up the leadership of the ultra-Orthodox – among the Lithuanian stream, the Hasidic stream, and the Sefardim – have passed away and the current leaders aren't as influential. So in the recent municipal elections, we saw the growing power of the 'independent voter'. This change is also connected to technology and access to knowledge being much more readily available. When people read on the internet about all the political infighting behind the scenes, they see how leaders are often manipulated by younger political advisors and conclude that even if they adore their Rabbis, they don't feel the need to obey the whims of their Rabbis' advisors. The percentage of ultra-Orthodox who use the internet is growing rapidly and now stands at around 50 per cent. In fact, you can divide up ultra-Orthodox society between those who uses the internet, and those who don't yet use the internet. And once an individual begins using it they have new access to knowledge.

CB-D: *Many people generally divide Israelis along the Right to Left spectrum based on their positions on national security issues. To what extent can ultra-Orthodox voters be described as right-wing or left-wing?*

GM: There are three elements to the Right-Left wing spectrum: On National security, the ultra-Orthodox are right-wingers. They feel very close to the Right, and they don't trust the Palestinians. In terms of religion and state, where the right-wing represents more traditional attitude, the ultra-Orthodox can also be described as politically right-wing. This is one of the main reasons the ultra-Orthodox political parties support the 'national camp'. But on the third element, the economy, ultra-Orthodox are actually more moderate and support welfare state policies. So ultra-Orthodox parties and voters definitely prefer the right-wing positions in two elements. But in a situation in which the Centre or Left win the election, the ultra-Orthodox parties can definitely cooperate with them and support their needs. Indeed, historically they cooperated with such governments.



THE COUNTRY WHERE THE CENTRE CAN HOLD

PINCHAS LANDAU

Pinchas Landau argues that the emergence of the new centrist party 'Blue and White' as the main rival to Netanyahu's Likud highlights the gulf between Israel and the (crumbling) democracies of the West.

The (Western) Centre can hold

'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold, The Second Coming, William Butler Yeats

That line, from Yeats' gloomy, fearful yet enigmatic 1919 poem has, in recent years, been among the most oft-quoted from the entire corpus of English-language poetry. And justifiably so, because it catches in a few sparse words the main themes of social and political distress that currently assail the rich and formerly stable countries of the West, namely Western Europe, North America and those Pacific Rim nations that have succeeded in joining the elite grouping.

In one after another of these countries, things have fallen and/or are falling apart, especially in the largest and hence most important Western countries: the US, UK and France. These 'things' include the key elements of the socio-economic fabric, namely law and order, steady jobs, wages and pensions and, perhaps above all, the family.

The Centre – the political Centre, that is – has crumbled in country after country. In this sad process, it is the UK that, incredibly but undeniably, has carved out for itself pride of place. The country that developed the institution of parliament and the concept of constitutional government; that was regarded as the paragon of stable government, thanks to a two-party system that enabled and practiced the orderly transfer of power; whose professional civil service was the exemplar of integrating change with continuity; that 'sceptered isle' – is now a septic sore, poisoned and seemingly bent on .

On a personal note: as a born Brit, I make a special effort to keep up with developments at Westminster and even to comprehend them. The latter hope seems, alas, to be forlorn. Of course I bypass the mainstream media, which is irremediably biased to one side or the other. Instead I ask many people – mostly natives, some foreigners now living in London – only to find that the natives have mostly given up the struggle to work out what their country's leadership is doing, and why 'Britain's two big parties are in a race to see which can fall apart fastest,' as The Economist's Bagehot column recently put it. As for the foreigners, they have totally tuned out: some have already left, others see no choice but to do so soon.

In practice, I conduct this 'poll' only in London, capital of the 'Remain' part of the 'United' Kingdom. Beyond, on all sides, lie stretches of euro-sceptic, euro-septic England, where the casualties from Margaret Thatcher's remaking of Britain in the 1980s were left to fester for decades – only to seize the opportunity presented by the Brexit referendum to gain their revenge on the 'Establishment' that turned its back on them. The Brexit debacle has poisoned the body politic, whilst achieving nothing – unless, that is, delivering the two main parties respectively into the hands of the European Research Group and the Corbynistas counts as an achievement.

While the case of Britain is arguably the most extreme example of the collapse of the political Centre in a leading democratic country, it is far from unique. On the contrary: across the pond, the US is locked into self-imposed governmental paralysis and dysfunction, against a background of increasingly violent swings of the political pendulum. The outlook for 2020 is simply much more of the same.

Meanwhile, across the Channel in Continental Europe, the restoration or achievement of democracy in the post-1945 and post-1990 eras is now in real and present danger. The stunning victories of Macron's new centrist movement had seemed to offer hope that the extremist forces in France could be held off or even defeated. But that hope has dissipated, exposing the fear that it is simply too late to change France's course; Italy, even more than France, has decided that the la-la-land lifestyle that it demands for itself is what Europe must agree to provide for it; and Germany, on which France, Italy and the rest of Europe unwillingly and uncomfortably lean, has apparently had enough of the whole

band of ingrates.

In all of these countries, as well as in many smaller ones, deep-seated and long-festering social and economic problems, aggravated by prolonged policy blunders, have undermined and ultimately destroyed the political structure that held sway through the post-war era. In one country after another, the Centre has failed to hold as more extreme ideas, parties and policies have gathered strength. The 20th century division of 'Right' and 'Left' has been rendered obsolete by the emergence of forces which, despite being labelled 'far-Right' and 'far-Left,' actually have far more in common in their joint opposition to the old parties that comprise the 'Establishment', than is implied by continued use of misleading and outdated nomenclature.

The rise of the Israeli centre

Yet the decline of democracy is not universal. There is a country on a very different political trajectory. True, it is reviled by most Western intellectuals, especially in the 'solid' democracies of Western Europe – most of which have yet to celebrate a full century of free speech and fair and free elections. A senior diplomatic representative of the highly-respected nation-state that gave the world 'Liberty, Equality and Fraternity' – not to mention the first, second, third, fourth and fifth republics, all in less than two centuries – not long ago called it "that shitty little country".

But, while Paris burns and France tears itself apart, Israel – and especially the Israeli political system – is healthy and solid, reflecting the healthy growth of the society which it represents and the economy which it oversees.

This statement will be widely rejected as ridiculous and even nonsensical in 'enlightened' circles in the Western democracies mentioned above. Yet the evidence supporting is plain for all to see – except for those so blinded by pre-conceived ideas as to be impervious to what is happening in front of their very eyes.

The key items of evidence are these:

- The current election campaign – like most of its predecessors – is focused on the political Centre.
- For the umpteenth (probably tenth, but one loses count) time in the last

42 years and the third time this decade, the new and rising force in Israeli politics is a self-proclaimed centrist party.

- The extremist parties (on both sides of the commonly-defined political spectrum) are weakening and the Centre is strengthening.

And, in more general terms:

In order to win — meaning to emerge as a large party; and then to attract the support of sufficient Knesset members to persuade the president to give that party a mandate to form a government; and then actually to construct a stable coalition that can govern for several years – a party has to win a large chunk of the centre ground.

The dynamics of coalition government, in which several smaller, ideologically ‘purer’ / more extreme, or single-issue parties – which often pull in different or even opposed directions – are subordinate to a dominant large party, tend to push that large party towards a more pragmatic, moderate position, a.k.a. the Centre.

This is not the picture of the domestic electoral process presented by the Israeli media. Liberal papers and pundits bewail the demise of the old centre-Left and left-wing parties, while cheering the failures of the Right. Their (fewer) right-wing peers do the same, but in reverse. Both sides ignore – out of contempt, one suspects – the remarkably stubborn insistence of the Israeli electorate to keep demanding centrist candidates and parties and giving these its support. No matter how many times these parties fail to deliver on their promises, the public – disappointed but not deterred – keep coming back for more.

The result is that in Israel, the Centre holds and only the Centre holds power. Netanyahu’s decade in office has been characterised by a relentless effort to move – sometimes to drag – Likud towards the (political, socio-economic, security and foreign affairs) centre, irrespective of his own or the party’s ideological preferences, so that it can retain power. Most of Likud’s leadership and local activists think, and would like to act, more ‘right-wing’ — as does Netanyahu himself, in all likelihood. But he doesn’t and they go along with his decisions, because moving too far from the centre would cause them to lose enough votes that they would lose power – and all the attendant benefits of holding power.

Examples of this self-discipline/ political realism/ pragmatism/ expedience/ ideological backsliding/ treachery (choose the description that suits your view) are legion, but two outstanding ones will suffice.

First, in the summer of 2011, in the wake of the ‘Arab Spring’ that rocked the region earlier that year, Israel was swept by a wave of unrest – the ‘social protest’ movement. The accepted wisdom in the Israeli media is that this movement generated much sound and fury but achieved nothing. The reality is that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, under pressure from his coalition with Labor (yes, really, in the current decade ...), jettisoned his signature policy of serial cuts in both taxes and government spending, whose legislative passage he had overseen. Nor was this a transient or tactical move. Thenceforth and over the subsequent seven years, fiscal policy has fundamentally changed course, from a declining trajectory (not absolutely, but relatively, in terms of GDP) to a rising one.

Second, one year ago, in spring 2018, the bon mot among military commentators was that ‘another round’ of fighting against Hamas in and around the Gaza Strip during the coming summer was ‘inevitable’. Foreign media swallowed this up because of the almost universal belief that Netanyahu is a warmonger, always looking for an opportunity to bash Hamas and other entities he regards as sworn enemies of Israel. The reality, once again, is the opposite. Ignoring demands for a more aggressive policy from his right-wing coalition partners, notably Naftali Bennett (then Jewish Home) and Avigdor Lieberman (Yisrael Beiteinu) – and despite massive pressure, publicly and via Likud activists, on the part of the Israeli population living near the Gaza Strip – Netanyahu threw his weight behind the army and intelligence consensus not to swallow Hamas’ bait, but rather to refrain from large-scale military activity. Nor was 2018 exceptional in this context: on the contrary, as he demonstrated in summer 2014 (‘Operation Protective Edge’) and subsequently, Netanyahu has consistently been opposed to large-scale ground incursions on the Gaza front – and has thus consistently ignored the clamour of his political ‘base’.

In other words, in ‘signature’ issues in both economic and security policy, Netanyahu has chosen practical political necessities over ideological preferences. In these and other cases, he did so because of a ‘big picture’ orientation: better to lose a battle, even an important one, than to endanger Likud’s hold on power

and thereby lose the war. And the way to lose the war would be by losing sufficient votes in the centre of Israeli politics that Likud's dominance would be compromised – because any extra votes garnered on the right could not cover that loss.

These examples, or others, do not represent a paean of praise for Netanyahu – each specific policy decision can be argued for or against – except in one respect, in which even his fiercest opponents do not disagree. He is a master politician, in a different league from the rest of the current field and for whom the platoon of ex-generals in the new Blue and White party, new recruits in the political arena, are no match.

Thus, it is certainly arguable – as many old-guard Likud grandees, such as Benny Begin and Ruby Rivlin, have cogently claimed – that Netanyahu's moral compass has been warped, so that he says and does things today he would never have considered in his youth. For his part, Netanyahu has clearly convinced himself that only he is fit to be premier – so that others, including former chiefs of staff, are a danger to the country's well-being.

It is also perfectly plausible to claim, as many commentators do, that the current election boils down to a vote for or against this belief of Netanyahu in himself and of others in Netanyahu.

But none of that changes the fact that the election will be won and lost in the centre ground, and it is there that the main battle is taking place – as it should, in a healthy democracy and as it almost always does in Israel. Thus to state the obvious fact that Netanyahu is the dominant figure in Israeli politics in the last decade is also to implicitly state that this is due to his conquest and continuing control of the centre-Right, so that the only threats to him and Likud have come from its Left – which, thanks to the remorseless decline of Labor, has come to mean the Centre, rather than the centre-Left.

The Israeli Centre's evolution

Ariel Sharon's creation of Kadima, hewn primarily out of Likud, was the first and probably the greatest threat Likud faced – and Netanyahu's rebuilding of the party after that trauma must rank as an outstanding political achievement. But

the ultimate failure of Kadima only seems to have spurred additional attempts to wrest control of the Centre from Likud.

Yair Lapid tried to do so via Yesh Atid, a more genuinely centrist entity than his late father's Shinui party. Despite winning an extraordinary 19 seats in its debut Knesset appearance, Yesh Atid failed in its primary goal of defeating Likud/ Netanyahu – but, unlike Shinui, it has managed to develop into a proper political party, with 'grass roots'. This has enabled it to survive an entire cycle of electoral success and failure and to re-emerge, via a merger with the newest 'new boy on the block', as a more plausible and hence greater threat in 2019 than it was – or could have been – in 2013.

The 'new boy' is, of course, Benny Gantz – who, with his fellow ex-generals Moshe Yaalon and Gabi Ashkenazi, seem to be following much of Lapid's copy-book from 2013. But they are also drawing from a much longer tradition of ex-generals seeking to win power by conquering the political Centre – a tradition that stretches back at least as far as Yigael Yadin's 'Party for Democratic Change' in 1977 and perhaps even to Moshe Dayan's link-up with Ben-Gurion in 'Rafi' in 1965.

Lapid in 2013, Moshe Kahlon's Kulanu in 2015 and now Gantz have all caused Likud to move toward the Centre, as Netanyahu refined a serially-successful electoral strategy: Likud could afford to lose right-wing votes to parties to the right of Likud, because these parties had no option but to remain in his 'camp' and hence under his dominion – whereas votes lost to the Centre would threaten his hold on power.

This understanding explains – but surely does not excuse – one of Netanyahu's most cynical moves ever. Faced with the implosion of the religious-right voting bloc following the decamping of Bennett and Ayelet Shaked from Jewish Home, Netanyahu virtually imposed on the hapless new leaders of Jewish Home and its even more right-wing sister party, National Union, a merger with the Kahlanist grouping Jewish Power – hitherto a pariah even among the mainstream religious-right parties.

Netanyahu calculation is clear and cold. While this election will be determined by votes for parties cast at the polls, achieving power will be determined by

which of the two large parties can muster 61 Knesset members to recommend its leader to the president. In other words, Likud could lose to Blue and White, but Netanyahu could still win the mandate to form a coalition – so long as there are sufficient parties to Likud's right which feel obliged to back Netanyahu over Gantz.

It therefore follows that no right-wing votes may be allowed to go to waste – as might happen if the religious-right parties were to run separately and one or more of them would fail to cross the threshold for Knesset representation (3.25 per cent of the vote). Therefore, the pariahs of Jewish Power must be allowed into the camp, to maximise the total right-wing vote – leaving Likud free to fight the main battle in the Centre.

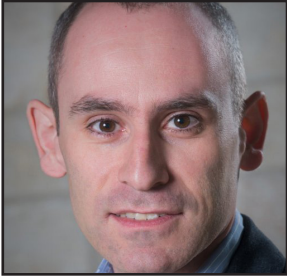
Yet however repulsive Jewish Power may be to the vast majority of Jewish voters, and hence however reprehensible Netanyahu's tactics in using it for his ends, the clamour over this development has succeeded in obscuring several remarkable features of this election and, by extension, of the state of Israeli politics – and how different this is to the political scene in the US, UK, France et al.

The record shows that extremist parties don't get into the Knesset easily, if at all. Their votes are usually lost.

- The reason for that is that these parties have very small constituencies.
- The reason is NOT because they are banned from running. On the contrary, the Israeli socio-political system allows and, in some respects, encourages extremist parties to run. It rarely and only reluctantly bans parties.

This pragmatic attitude has deep roots, as discussed in Shany Mor's excellent recent article, and which is best – if simply and crudely – summarised in LBJ's comment about J Edgar Hoover: 'It's probably better to have the SOB inside the tent pissing out, than outside the tent pissing in'.

The triumph of pragmatic centrism in Israel is not surprising, if and when you stop to think about it. For a country that faces enormous challenges in so many spheres, common sense – as well as long experience – says that only a pragmatic centrist government can deliver both external security and internal stability via prosperity. Not only can the Centre hold, but it must – so it will.



WITH GANTZ, HAS ISRAEL'S CENTRE FOUND ITS FEET?

TONY GREENE

Toby Greene argues that the merger between the Gantz's Israel Resilience Party and Lapid's Yesh Atid represents the third phase in Israeli centrism, which rather than being about the Palestinian issue or the economy is focused on the very character of Israeli politics and the values of the state.

The third phase of Israeli centrist parties

The merger of parties led by former IDF chief of staff Benny Gantz and Yesh Atid party leader and former finance minister Yair Lapid, to create the new 'Blue and White' party, has created the most credible challenge to Netanyahu from the centre since he was elected in 2009.

But unity comes at the cost of clarity. The new list, that also includes two other former IDF chiefs of staff – former Likud defence minister Moshe 'Bogie' Yaalon, and Gabi Ashkenazi – is best characterised as the ABB 'Anything But Bibi' party. The formation is not based on a shared policy agenda, and has no common position on the Palestinian question in particular. This may be puzzling for many outside Israel, who might assume this is Israel's most pressing concern, and the key wedge issue in Israeli politics. Understanding this development requires historical perspective.

What we are witnessing is a third phase in Israeli centrism. The first phase, from around 2005 to 2011 formed around the Palestinian issue. The second phase beginning in 2011 was about the socio-economic grievances of the broadly secular middle class. This third phase is about the very character of Israeli politics and the values of the state.

The Gantz Agenda

When Benny Gantz launched his campaign in January, most conspicuous was

his attempt to transcend the left-right dichotomy. “There is no more right and left, there is just Israel before all else”, exclaimed his posters and jingles. By way of illustration, his list of candidates includes former Netanyahu aides alongside former Labor candidates.

The central message of his launch speech was not about policy – though it did address policy issues – but rather about the nature of politics and the values of the country’s leadership. “More and more people, both right and left, myself included, are deeply embarrassed by the way our leadership conducts itself,” Gantz declared, “A strong government governs to unite and doesn’t govern in order to separate, to rule.”

When he turned to the Palestinian question – he made a broad commitment to break the deadlock, citing Menachem Begin’s peace with Egypt, Yitzhak Rabin’s peace with Jordan, and Netanyahu’s Bar Ilan speech (in which he accepted the principle of a Palestinian state) as precedents. But he was conspicuously vague on the details.

In a carefully worded passage he said: “if it turns out that there is no way to reach peace at this time, we will shape a new reality. Israel will not be deprived of its status as a strong, Jewish and democratic state ... we will maintain security in the entire Land of Israel, but we will not allow the millions of Palestinians living beyond the separation fence to endanger our security and our identity as a Jewish state.”

In the context of Israeli policy debates, this language hints at unilateral steps to separate from the Palestinians in the West Bank, which would preserve the possibility for an eventual two-state outcome. But it does so very obliquely, without even mentioning a Palestinian state. This is because unilateral separation has been explicitly rejected by the right leaning candidates on Gantz’s list (including Moshe Yaalon), and risks alienating a key target constituency: disaffected Likud voters.

Gantz is the latest in a series of candidates to take on Netanyahu and Likud. He is the first however, to mount a credible challenge in terms of the public’s preferred prime ministerial candidate. Gantz has the benefit of being fresh and untainted, whilst dissatisfaction with Netanyahu is growing. In addition, he

more closely resembles previous election winners of the centre-left – Yitzhak Rabin and Ehud Barak. They too were former IDF chief of staffs, able to clear the critical threshold of credibility on security, despite signalling pragmatism on the Palestinian question, and offering to reduce tensions between the state and its non-Jewish minorities. It is Gantz's electoral strength that has enabled him to corral his centre-ground rival Yair Lapid into a partnership, with himself at the head of the ticket.

Gantz though, faces a greater challenge than Rabin or Barak in articulating a coherent program that will win over voters from Netanyahu or his coalition partners. The causes lie deep in the roots of Israel's social diversity, highly proportional electoral system, and political and social changes over the last three decades.

The roots of Israel Left and Right

A combination of high levels of social diversity and a low electoral threshold has resulted in Israel's party system reinventing itself at every new election.

Israel's population – even its Jewish population – has always been diverse. At Israel's founding, it included left-socialist, centrist and right-revisionist parties, as well as religious Zionists, and ultra-Orthodox Jews. With the massive influx of Mizrahi Jews from Middle Eastern countries, their ethnic and socio-economic differences with the Ashkenazi elite also became significant.

At the same time, Israeli party-politics has always been fragmented. As a parliamentary democracy it could be considered Britain's opposite. Whereas Britain's first past the post system crushes new parties, by preventing them gaining seats, Israel's directly proportional system makes it relatively easy for them to gain representation. This reduces the motivation to stay loyal to the large parties, and increases the tendency for splits.

In the early decades of the state, the most coherent block was the Israeli left, representing the dominant Socialist-Zionist ideology of the largely Ashkenazi elites. The bloc were hawkish on security issues, but pragmatic in principle on diplomatic and territorial questions. In the 1970s the Likud formed as a union of right-wing nationalist, territorially maximalist, and economically liberal par-

ties, which managed to also appeal to Mizrahi voters frustrated at the Ashkenazi-dominated elites. It came to power in 1977; partly as a result of a split on the left and the emergence of a short-lived centrist party, 'Dash', and formed a coalition with the national religious who shared its commitment to settling in the occupied territories.

Dash soon dissipated, and in the 1980s Israel more closely resembled Britain's two party system – with Likud and Labor holding well over 40 seats each in the 120 seat Knesset.

Shattering of ideology and first Centrist phase

The rise and fall of the Oslo peace process shattered the ideological agendas of both Labor and Likud. Labor pursued a negotiated agreement with the PLO to resolve the Palestinian question. Arafat's rejection though, of the Barak-Clinton final status proposals in 2000, and the outbreak of the Second Intifada, shattered the credibility of Labor's gambit that territorial compromise could bring peace. The very term 'peace' became a watchword in Israel for dangerous naivety. Fewer and fewer voters identified as 'left' – which came to carry similar connotations. The bloody years of the First and Second Intifadas however, increasingly made it apparent that controlling a large Palestinian population – an inevitable consequence of Likud's territorial maximalism – was also inherently unstable, and threatened Israel's future as a Jewish and democratic state.

The failure of Likud ideology to cope with this contradiction during the Second Intifada ultimately split the party. Its then-leader Ariel Sharon began a process of unilateral separation from the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and northern West Bank in 2005, and then led the moderate wing of Likud in the formation of a new centrist party to continue the process in the West Bank.

Their new Kadima party, which included former Labor Prime Minister Shimon Peres, was the first to lead a government from the centre. The agenda to separate from the Palestinians was indistinguishable from that of Labor, with whom it entered a coalition, but it was fronted by Likud defectors – initially Sharon, and later Ehud Olmert and Tzipi Livni.

This centre-left coalition's term began with the Second Lebanon War in 2006

and ended with Operation Cast Lead in 2009. In both conflicts Israel struggled to prevent thousands of rockets being fired at its towns from formerly occupied territories it had unilaterally evacuated; South Lebanon (in 2000) and the Gaza Strip (in 2005). After Hamas took over the Gaza Strip in 2007, the Olmert government made its own attempt to reach a final status agreement with the PLO, but its best offer was rebuffed.

Faced with these failures, corruption investigations into Prime Minister Olmert, and surging anti-Arab sentiment during Operation Cast Lead, swing voters leaned on right wing parties, and especially Netanyahu's Likud. With the perceived failure of unilateral disengagement, Kadima's 'centrist' answer to the Palestinian question appeared no more credible than right or left alternatives. Kadima maintained its strength in 2009, but only by taking votes from parties to the left, Labor and Meretz.

The second phase: The marginalisation of the Palestinian issue

For Israeli voters – especially secular-Jewish voters – security is the number one priority. Netanyahu's success in the 2009, 2013 and 2015 elections (consistently securing around 30 seats) rested on his image as the leader best able to deliver it. After his victory in 2009 he combined this with a diplomatic tack to the centre. Netanyahu offered conditional support for a two state solution, thereby distancing himself from hard-right territorial maximalists, but showed no sense of urgency to bring it about. He engaged in US-sponsored peace negotiations, but the de facto policy was managing the status quo.

The perceived failure of unilateralism, Netanyahu's theoretical acceptance of a Palestinian state, and the PLO shift away from negotiations towards seeking unilateral recognition, reduced the political salience of the Palestinian question. A majority of the secular-Jewish public agreed: a two state-solution was desirable but unobtainable, since the PLO's demands exceeded even the most generous Israeli offers, and unilateral withdrawals led to armed Islamist groups on Israel's borders.

Mass street protests that broke out in 2011 over the cost of living, marked a shift to the second phase of Israeli centrism, with the domestic agenda refocussing on socio-economic issues. This sudden refocusing of the domestic agenda saw

Kadima become irrelevant. Its place was taken by Yair Lapid's new Yesh Atid party, which competed with a shrunken Labor to soak up the socio-economic grievances of middle class families.

Though Lapid also favoured separation from the Palestinians, it was not his banner issue, and he worked hard to reject any attempt to brand him as 'left' – the toxic label which had become such a burden for Labor. His principle agenda was promoting 'equal service' (meaning conscription) from the ultra-Orthodox sector. This rhetoric captured the frustrations of non-Haredi Israeli-Jewish families. Households with two working parents, with individuals serving in the army and weighed down by the high cost of living, were fed up of subsidising the ultra-Orthodox, whose men were not conscripted and barely worked, through their taxes. This system was sustained by the political power of the ultra-Orthodox, willing to lend Knesset strength to any coalition that fulfilled their demands, and defined by Netanyahu as his 'natural partners'.

Lapid was significant in recognising the political significance of a demographic shift, whereby due to the rapid growth of ultra-Orthodox, Arab, and national religious sectors, secular Jews found themselves a minority. He appealed not only to the economic interests of this sector, but their values and identity.

The fight for the Israeli centre has become a struggle to win the allegiance of this sector – especially its more affluent (and generally more Ashkenazi) elements – increasingly concerned that the state is being ripped away from them. This sector has proven extremely fluid electorally, seeking a credible candidate to represent it. With the decline of the structural base of the Labor party (old Ashkenazi elites and institutions like the trade unions and the Kibbutzim), and their ideological agenda, the centre-left has until now lacked a stable core party to rival Likud.

In the 2015 election, much of this floating vote coalesced around Zionist Union – a rebranded coalition of Labor led by Isaac Herzog, and a smaller party led by Tzipi Livni. But whilst it looked temporarily like it might overtake Likud, this ticket ultimately failed to win over supporters from the Likud or other right wing parties.

The third phase: Netanyahu and his populism is the issue

As the centrist agenda has evolved, Netanyahu has doubled down on an increasingly populist-nationalist political strategy. His message to the Israeli electorate is that rather than the integrity of the state being threatened by the agendas of the pro-settlement national religious sector, far-right Jewish nationalists, or by ultra-Orthodox parties – his natural coalition partners – it is threatened by a coalition of Arabs, leftists, and liberal elites. These elements would, he claims, erase Israel's Jewish character, divide Jerusalem, and make territorial compromises that will imperil the country. This was encapsulated in his notorious 2015 election day social media post warning, 'Arab voters are coming out in droves to the polling stations', which was credited for a late surge of otherwise apathetic Likud voters, especially Mizrahim in peripheral towns.

Since then, like populist-nationalists in Europe, his coalition has increasingly attacked institutions defending liberal-democratic principles – the media, the Supreme Court, NGOs, critical foreign governments, academics and others – as being part of a conspiracy to undermine the Jewish character of the state. As Netanyahu has become threatened by corruption charges, this assault has extended even to the police and criminal justice systems, who, despite being led by Netanyahu appointees, have been branded as tools of a conspiracy to unseat him.

All these 'enemies of the state' are now lumped together and branded with the epithet of 'smol' (the Hebrew word for left), which is applied as a term of the greatest denigration. It is combatting this very brand of politics, and the personal corruption of Netanyahu, which has become the new banner issue for parties pitching to the centre in the 2019 election.

Can Gantz lead the Centre to victory?

All rivals to the left of Netanyahu understand that to overturn him and his partners, they need to win seats from right wing parties, not just off one another as they have in recent elections. Until this election, the push and pull factors have not been strong enough.

On the one hand, not enough Israeli voters have been sufficiently dissatisfied to

abandon Netanyahu, who is still generally regarded as competent with regards to security and the economy. Whilst cost of living is high, the economy is growing consistently and unemployment is low. Israel is in a perpetual security crisis, but the impact has been mainly limited to the Gaza border area and the West Bank settlements. Netanyahu can also tout diplomatic successes, such as Trump moving the US embassy to Jerusalem and pulling out of the Iran deal, in addition to warming ties with India.

On the other hand, opposition parties have not presented a prime ministerial candidate who is sufficiently convincing, especially in the realms of security and diplomacy. Therefore, no opposition leader has had sufficient authority to unite the others in single electoral list, until Gantz.

This explains the three central features of the new Gantz-led centrist constellation: an all-star cast of ex-generals with impeccable security credentials; a commitment to set aside Netanyahu's populist political agenda; but only the vaguest positions on the Palestinian question.

With indictments for bribery hanging over Netanyahu, this could just be enough to erode Netanyahu's base and create an anti-Netanyahu Knesset bloc, with the backing of smaller parties including Labor, left-liberal Meretz, and the Arab parties, all committed to preventing Netanyahu forming another government. However, even if such a bloc is able to ensure that Gantz, and not Netanyahu, is asked by President Rivlin to form a government, there is still a plethora of possible coalitions. So aside from a significant change in style, the concrete political program of a future Gantz-led government is difficult to predict. If this new super-party of the centre is forced into opposition, it may not have enough coherence to survive.

Either way, one thing is for sure: with the country's shifting demographics and deep divisions over the balance between its Jewish and democratic identity, the struggle to define Israel's future will go on.

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