



THE ELECTION RESULTS IN ISRAEL: REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS AND NETANYAHU'S IMMEDIATE CHALLENGES

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The results of the elections in Israel (9 April 2019) can only be understood as an impressive and significant achievement by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the right-wing in Israel. The success of the Blue and White party (35 seats) is the result of a wave of votes from the Labour and Meretz parties, but it does not reflect a real increase in the Central Bloc. Voters who support the centre-left parties strategically chose to give their vote to Blue and White, although identified as having right-wing views, because they believed it is the only possible way to replace Netanyahu. If we add to this the 300,000 votes for the New Right party and the Identity party, which are identified as right-wingers but did not pass the threshold, it is clear that the right in Israel, together with the ultra-Orthodox parties, wins an overwhelming majority and its real weight is about 75 seats (out of 120).

The results of the elections and the coalition government that will be established have far-reaching implications for society and politics in Israel, but no less so for the region as well. Netanyahu's pledge to annex settlements, apparently as lip service to recruit voters from parties to the right of the Likud, is complicating things at home and abroad. On the one hand, the Prime Minister will have to commit himself to his right-wing partners as part of the coalition's agreements to carry out his promise. On the other, he will have to convince

the Palestinians and the rest of the world that he does not intend to do so. Nevertheless, Netanyahu's public statements have already unleashed a wave of criticism of him and Israel, providing the Palestinians with an important card to justify their refusal to renew the political process and reach a final status agreement that would end the conflict with Israel.

Netanyahu has managed to warm relations with the Arab countries' pragmatic camp, led

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by Egypt and Saudi Arabia, mainly due to his close relations with the American and Russian presidents and his international standing. Even if this fact has prevented him from fulfilling his promise of annexing some of the West Bank's territories before elections, his statements on this issue have added another layer of difficulty in promoting normalisation of relations with Arab countries.

Even though Netanyahu succeeds in persuading his coalition partners to accept the Trump plan for an Israeli-Palestinian agreement on the pretext that the Palestinians will reject it anyway, it is hard to see a chance for real progress on this front. Netanyahu, who is known for his adherence to the status quo, no longer identifiable due to the current changing dynamics, will refrain from moves and initiatives to change and improve the existing reality. This trend will be reinforced by the Prime Minister's fear and unwillingness to pay the political costs of continued Palestinian refusal to reach a final status agreement.

In the absence of any change and assuming that the Palestinian leadership will reject the Trump plan, it is reasonable to presume that the American administration will not only change its current policy toward the Palestinian Authority (PA) but will also intensify the sanctions against it and the pressures on it. The economic reality and the difficult functioning of the PA may become the incubator of the next intifada and a serious deterioration in the Israeli-Palestinian

social reality, and in the relations between Israel and the PA. It is not inconceivable that the latter will try to prompt an escalation in Jerusalem, particularly around the Temple Mount compound, and to mobilise Jordan alongside it, thus diverting the anger and frustration of the Palestinian street toward Israel.

Therefore, the negative dynamic vis-à-vis the PA intensifies the challenge facing Netanyahu at the beginning of his fifth term: how to persuade pragmatic Arab states (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates) to play a constructive role in the peace initiative expected to be presented by US President Donald Trump and to prevent them from standing firmly with the Palestinians in case they reject the American deal. Washington and Jerusalem will strive to provide the Arab parties with economic and political advantages in the proposed plan and coordinate with them the parameters that will allow them to present it to their domestic public opinion as "fair" and as the basis for an agreement, or at least as a starting point for negotiations on a settlement.

On the other hand, it is precisely in the Gaza Strip that a positive change is likely to emerge. Netanyahu's political fortunes, his reservations about dramatic military moves in Gaza, his desire to rehabilitate it as a component of President Trump's plan, his commitment to Egypt and the desire to maintain close ties with President al-Sisi may turn out to be a possible recipe for promoting an expanded format of calm agreement,

including massive humanitarian aid, with Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Hamas, which will reject the Trump plan, will be able to explain that it is responding to the proposal to rehabilitate the Gaza Strip as part of the calm agreement with Israel and will have no difficulty living with this duality.

Avigdor Lieberman's entrance into the Netanyahu government, particularly if he is appointed defence minister, may force the Prime Minister to make tougher military responses in case of a deliberate escalation by Hamas, but this will not change the strategic goal to which he is aiming. Netanyahu will make every effort to reach an agreement with Hamas before composing his coalition and avoid military entanglement in the Gaza Strip, even at the price of escalating tension with Avigdor Lieberman. This will require political manoeuvring in order to allow Lieberman to prove that he means what he says when it comes to Hamas, while at the same time minimising the potential for escalation and deterioration of the security situation in Gaza.

Netanyahu understands the fear of the Right Unity party and Yisrael Beiteinu – his potential partners, each with only five representatives – from additional elections

because this could mean the end of their political existence. He can pressure both parties and exhaust their ability to prevent him from advancing his political objectives, threatening them to call for new elections if they become rebellious. Therefore, even though the next Israeli government is expected to be more right-wing than the previous one, which was also right-wing, it is hard to see any real change in Netanyahu's policy regarding the Palestinian issue and other regional issues. If there is a change in the guidelines and patterns of action of the new government, it will be reflected in a series of internal issues and in the relations of the Jewish people in Israel with Diaspora Jewry.

When it comes to the European arena, it is reasonable to assume that Netanyahu will continue to place his trust in strengthening ties with the countries and leaders he nurtured in recent years. He will continue to invest, with US backing, in the cultivation and development of the tripartite alliance between Israel, Greece and Cyprus, as well as in the strengthening of relations with countries such as the Czech Republic, Romania, Poland and Hungary, with the aim of weakening the European Union's ability to lead a critical policy against Israel.