

Israel: Return to the Polls and Regional Uncertainty

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► **To cite this version:**

Alain Dieckhoff. Israel: Return to the Polls and Regional Uncertainty. IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2013, European Institute of the Mediterranean, pp.193-195, 2013. hal-01044549

HAL Id: hal-01044549

<https://hal-sciencespo.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01044549>

Submitted on 23 Jul 2014

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Israel: Return to the Polls and Regional Uncertainty

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The January 2013 Elections

On 22 January 2013, the Israelis held the early legislative elections that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had wished for. While hitherto enjoying a stable political majority (66 MPs out of 120), he decided to make use of his relatively widespread popularity to strengthen his party's parliamentary presence, particularly before difficult budget decisions. Ultimately, he only partially succeeded in this aim. Certainly, in March 2013, Netanyahu was appointed Prime Minister for the third time, thus becoming the politician to remain at the head of the Israeli government the longest after David Ben Gurion. This political longevity is quite an accomplishment in and of itself, considering the high parliamentary volatility characterising the Israeli democracy. The fact remains, however, that the electoral strategy of strengthening the Likud party failed, and the results held some surprises.

With the elections in perspective, Benjamin Netanyahu had forged an alliance with the Russian-speaking party, Yisrael Beiteinu, headed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Avigdor Lieberman.² The aim was to expand their joint constituency. However, the inverse

occurred: from 42 seats in the Knesset before elections, they went down to 31. This decline can be attributed to the fact that the electoral union displeased two Likud constituency groups: on the one hand, liberal right voters, because the unified list was undeniably deeply anchored in militant nationalism; and on the other hand, traditionalist voters, who did not at all appreciate the "secular" image of the Russian-speaking party. Suddenly, the Likud had lost centre and right-wing votes, a loss that benefited the centre party Yesh Atid ("There is a Future"), led by the journalist Yair Lapid (19 seats) and Naftali Bennett's The Jewish Home (12 seats). These two parties were the revelations of the elections.

Though the success of Yair Lapid's party had been anticipated by surveys, its extent was not. This is most likely due to the mobilisation of the middle class, essentially secular Israelis overwhelmed by the disproportionate load of taxes and military conscription they bear. This is the same middle class that protested massively over the summer of 2011 in the "tent movement" to demand greater social justice, and more particularly the regulation of real estate prices and the reduction of direct taxes.

Besides social concerns, the second motivation that led voters to choose Yesh Atid was the growing sense of injustice in the face of generous exemptions from military service for ultra-orthodox Jews. Whereas secular and nationalist-religious Israelis, if they are men, spend three years serving in the military and then carry out periods in the reserve until they are forty, 55,000 students of the

¹ He has published *Le conflit israélo-arabe* (Armand Colin, 2011) and edited *The Routledge Handbook of Modern Israel* (Routledge, 2013). By the same token, he has also co-edited, together with Frédéric Charillon, the annual publication *Afrique du Nord/Moyen-Orient* published by La Documentation Française.

² Lieberman resigned from his post in mid-December 2012, after being charged with fraud and embezzlement in a case involving companies in Belarus.

institutes of Talmudic studies are exempt from military obligations by virtue of an old agreement from 1948. This general exemption means that the burden of military service is not shared equally. Moreover, since the exemption requires them to dedicate themselves wholly to the study of the Torah, young ultra-orthodox Jews are not allowed to work but depend on various types of social aid funded by the State budget.

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The second revelation of the elections, The Jewish Home, shares Yesh Atid's concern for equality. What distinguishes it is its highly nationalist message: it is in favour of the annexation of the entire Zone C (60% of the West Bank territory still under Israeli control), which explains how it garnered a great deal of support in West Bank settlements. In any case, The Jewish Home has managed to expand its following well beyond this ideological constituency by luring voters, even along the Mediterranean coast, who are attracted by the "high-tech entrepreneur" facet of the party's new leader, Naftali Bennett, from a family of American immigrants.

In view of the election results, Benjamin Netanyahu has formed a coalition government gathering Yesh Atid, The Jewish Home and the centre party Hatnua, led by former Foreign Affairs Minister Tzipi Livni, around the Likud party. Its immediate task will be threefold: start working on enlisting ultra-orthodox Jews; devise an institutional reform to reduce parliamentary fragmentation; implement a budget of austerity. The latter measure will entail budget cuts, including for the defence ministry, so as to check the growth of public deficit (4.2% of the GDP in 2012). On the other hand, the relaunching of negotiations with the Palestinian Authority – at an impasse for years now – stands little chance of being a priority. There are two reasons for this: first of all, the coalition partners are divided, Yair Lapid being in favour

of the solution of two States, which Naftali Bennett rejects; and secondly, the rather alarming regional context is hardly conducive to bold advances.

Growing Risk of Regional Isolation

Israeli-Palestinian Deadlock

On 14 November 2012, Israel launched Operation Pillar of Defence after further deterioration of the Gaza Strip situation. The launching of this military campaign demonstrated that, four years after Operation Cast Lead, nothing had really been settled between Israel and Hamas. After 1,500 air raids carried out by Israeli aviation against rocket launchers, weapons workshops and official buildings while Hamas launched 1,500 rockets and missiles against Israel (for the first time including Tel Aviv and Jerusalem), the "mini-war" came to a close, eight days later, with a new cease-fire maintaining a fragile status quo.

While Israel was engaged in a military wrestling match with Hamas, a more subdued political struggle was being carried out by Tel Aviv vis-à-vis the Palestinian Authority (PA). In an attempt to break the persistent stalemate, Mahmoud Abbas chose to bring the case of Palestine before the international community, obtaining Palestine's non-member observer status with the UN (November 2012). This symbolic victory did not, however, change anything in practice, as the Israeli government demonstrated by taking double retaliation, i.e. launching new planning and construction programmes (including in Zone E-1, to the east of Jerusalem), and temporarily freezing the transfer of taxes collected by Israel on behalf of the PA. Through these gestures, Netanyahu wished to indicate that no Palestinian State would see the light without Israel's consent.

Can we expect a relaunch of negotiations during Barack Obama's second term? In principle, an American president free from the concern of re-election can afford to be bolder, but it is not certain that Obama will take this path, since he was already deeply involved in the Israeli-Palestinian question at the beginning of his first term without obtaining significant results. During his official visit to the Middle East in March of 2013, he was, moreover, very careful not to announce any action

plan whatsoever. The only tangible gain is the announcement of the official reconciliation between Tel Aviv and Ankara after a nearly three-year falling out pursuant to the interception by the Israeli navy of a Turkish ship seeking to break the naval blockade on Gaza (nine Turkish activists were killed during the assault). This announced rapprochement clearly owes a great deal to the deep transformations taking place in the region, which are a matter of concern for both Turkey and Israel.

A Disquieting Arab Spring

The end of the Mubarak regime constituted a strategic loss for Israel. Although political disagreements had not been lacking over the thirty years of Mubarak's presidency, the two countries, tied by an alliance with the United States, shared the same concern for confining the influence of Islamist forces. The revolution in Egypt has had very rapid effects. The deterioration of the security situation on the Sinai Peninsula, a phenomenon that is not new, has accelerated during the chaotic transition stage, under the action of activist groups involving Bedouins and Palestinians. In addition, the pipeline carrying gas to Israel – which covers 40% of the country's needs – was sabotaged several times, interrupting the gas supply and finally leading to the complete suspension of supplies in April 2012.³ Finally, the rise to power of Islamist forces in Egypt, symbolised by the election of Mohammed Morsi as President in June 2012, has modified the situation for Hamas in Gaza, which now has a political ally in Cairo. The context has thus undeniably changed for Israel, even if the new Egypt has succeeded in demonstrating pragmatism by maintaining diplomatic relations with Tel Aviv. This prudence was also perfectly illustrated by the active role Cairo played in the declaration of the ceasefire after last November's "mini-war" in Gaza.

Apart from the case of Egypt, the developments in Syria are, of course, a central concern. Under the leadership of the Assads, Syria has often attempted to counter Israel's regional ambitions. In this regard,

the downfall of the regime would represent an undeniable strategic gain in many regards (end of the alliance with Teheran, weakening of Hezbollah). At the same time, Israeli leaders are well aware that the end of Baathist Syria could be accompanied by prolonged chaos, with destabilising regional effects. Syria under the Assads was an obstinate adversary of Israel but understood the power relations quite well and was always careful not to cross certain red lines (in particular on the military level). What will happen tomorrow in the "new Syria"?

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The developments in Jordan are likewise followed with attention. The Hashemite Kingdom is, in fact, together with Egypt, the only Arab State to have signed a peace treaty with Israel. Though King Abdullah has managed to date to stem agitation in his kingdom, the extremely limited reforms he has introduced have not appeased the political opposition. A long-term weakening of the monarchy would have very direct negative consequences for Israel, given the close ties between the two banks of the River Jordan.

On the whole, Israeli decision-makers, like a large part of public opinion, do not see the developments in the Middle East in a very positive light. Friendly regimes have been swept away (Egypt) or weakened (Jordan) whereas when fair elections are organised, the Islamists take the day, which inevitably leads to the adoption of a more critical posture towards Israel and a distancing. For Israel, the Arab Spring means greater isolation in the Middle East at a time when the Iranian nuclear question remains unresolved.

³ In April 2013, Israel began tapping the underwater Tamar gas field (whose reserves are estimated at 238 billion cubic metres), putting the country on the road towards energy independence.