



ISRAEL MATTERS!

Publication of the Israel Affairs Committee of Temple Beth Shalom
1809 Whitney Avenue, Hamden, CT 06517-1401



Issue Number 142
April 2020

Netanyahu, and Israel, at an Impasse

Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu almost- but not did quite- win the country's third national elections within a year. Exit polls just after the end of voting showed the right wing, nationalist, and religious parties with 60 seats in the Knesset, just shy of a 60-seat majority. Nevertheless, Netanyahu and his allies claimed a stunning victory, and speculation was rife in Israeli media that a conservative candidate from a left-wing party could be induced to jump ship and join the right-wing bloc to enable the formation of a government.

As it turned out, after final votes were tallied, right-wing and religious parties achieved 58 seats, while the opposition parties received 62 seats. The result for the Right was indeed impressive, given that voters were presented with the prospect of keeping in power a prime minister indicted on corruption charges. But while enticing one opposition candidate to defect to the right may have been possible, enticing three candidates from rival parties to defect seems extremely unlikely.

So why has Netanyahu been unable to gain clear majorities in successive elections? Why has he been able to do well, but not well enough?

Netanyahu's election refrain is that he is the only candidate who can guarantee Israel's security in the volatile Middle East. This is the one area on which most Israelis agree, believing that a peace deal with the Palestinians is impossible for the near future (the Trump administration's attempt notwithstanding) and that countering Iran's influence is a top national priority.

The Prime Minister has also sought to energize his base by tying his corruption indictments to long-held right-wing suspicions that Israel's judicial system functions as a kind of "deep state" that works to the benefit of the Left. In the most serious indictment, Netanyahu is

accused of offering favorable government policies to a telecommunications tycoon in exchange for more-positive coverage on a popular news website. Netanyahu regularly maintains that the positive coverage never materialized and that the supposedly favorable policies he implemented cost the tycoon a fortune.

However, these arguments have failed to pursue a majority of voters to support Netanyahu. Most Jewish voters who chose opposition parties are fed up with Netanyahu's insistence on remaining in power despite the corruption charges against him. (They also note that Israel's attorney general, who brought the indictments, is a right-wing Netanyahu appointee.) A smaller segment of these voters are frustrated with Netanyahu's alliance with Haredi (ultra-orthodox) parties, whose demands for state funding of yeshivas and refusal to allow yeshiva students to be drafted into the army are resented by secular Jews. Arab voters, meanwhile, view Netanyahu as not only corrupt but a racist who has incited hatred against the Arab public for the sake of gaining the support of Israel's far Right. As for the prime minister's claim to be essential for Israel's security, the largest opposition party, the centrist Blue and White, is headed by three generals, all for IDF chiefs of staff.

The various objections to Netanyahu have led most voters to reject his premiership for close to a year. However, the opposition to Netanyahu has yet to united around a clear vision for the country other than "anyone but Bibi." This is partly because the Israeli Left is still struggling to define itself after its previous support for peace deals with the Palestinians and after socialist economic policies have been rejected by large swaths of the public. Perhaps more importantly, in order to form a government, the opposition would need lawmakers who have expressed support for terrorists. So, the country is

left with an opposition struggling to put forth a unifying, inspiring, and sufficiently reassuring program.

Further complicating matters, parties on both the left and right have publicly staked out positions- some won't form a government with Haredi and/or Arab parties, several won't sit with Netanyahu, etc.- that make forming a governing coalition well nigh impossible without at least one party reneging on its promises.

By Thursday, opposition parties seemed to coalesce around a possible step forward. Lawmakers have proposed a bill that would bar any Knesset member under criminal indictment from forming a government- a measure that would prevent Netanyahu from becoming prime minister. The chances that the Knesset will succeed in passing the bill are unclear, and one can be sure that Netanyahu will use every means at his disposal to fight the proposed bill's passage.

If the opposition fails to oust Netanyahu, Israel may head to its fourth round of elections. That scenario would leave Netanyahu in power as caretaker prime minister better than nothing, but still disappointing as he attempts to lead the country while fighting corruption indictments, all without a clear mandate from the public. Netanyahu's central claim, that only he can guide Israel through the vicissitudes and upheavals of the Middle East, will have been rejected.

If Israel lurches to fourth elections, observers may wonder if Netanyahu's continued premiership is the result of political genius or of a deep unwillingness to admit that Israeli voters have decided his time is up.

(Taken from Zachary Evans, *The National Review*. March 6, 2020)

Two-week isolation ordered for all who enter Israel.

There are now 50 people diagnosed with coronavirus in Israel. All people entering Israel from abroad will be required to spend 14 days in home isolation, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Monday. The measure became effective at 8 p.m. Monday Night.

"After a day of complex discussions, we have made a decision: Whoever arrives in Israel from abroad will enter quarantine for 14 days," Netanyahu said in a video statement Monday as 50 Israelis were diagnosed with coronavirus. "This is a difficult decision, but it is essential to maintaining public health, which takes precedence over everything. This decision will be in effect for two weeks, at the same time we will make decisions to safeguard the Israeli economy."

Specifically, the isolation requirement applies to both Israelis and foreign travelers alike. No non-citizens will be able to enter Israel without proving they have a place to stay out their quarantine. Tourists who are already in Israel will be given a few days to organize their flights back home.

(Taken from and abridged Maayan Jaffe-Hoffman. *The Jerusalem Post*. March 10, 2020)

Community Corner

- Michelle Krupel celebrated her 50th birthday.

Grocery Cards

Purim has gone by and now Passover is here. Hopefully, you still have some last things to buy.

Please pick up cards for Big Y, ShopRite, and Stop & Shop before you buy those last-minute items. The cards are available at the Temple office during regular business hours and from these people:

Remember we get 5% from the stores. Our profit helps keep our dues down.

Any questions call Toby Gillman.

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