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The Foreign Policy Implications of Israel's 2015 Elections

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Henry Kissinger once quipped that “Israel has no foreign policy; it has only a domestic policy.” While this may be a slight hyperbole, now that the dust has settled after the March 17th Israeli elections and a coalition government has been formed, it is a useful reminder as we turn to evaluating its foreign policy and geopolitical implications.

The current Israeli coalition

The Knesset (Israel’s parliament) is composed of 120 members who are elected according to a closed-list system of proportional representation. Since no Israeli political party has ever won an outright majority (something that was also true of the March 17th elections), Israel has always been governed by coalition governments. The Israeli government that was sworn in last week is led by the Likud and supported by a combination of ultra-orthodox Jewish parties, a right-wing nationalist religious party, and a new center-right party concerned largely with domestic socio-economic policies.

Foreign policy and geopolitical implications

Two features of this government merit special attention for evaluating its potential foreign policy and geopolitical implications: 1) it is a government that is quite hawkish in terms of Israeli-Palestinian relations; and 2) it is a very narrow government, having the support of 61 of the 120 members of Parliament. The fact that this coalition depends on the continued support of each and every member (including back-benchers and ideologues whose potential defections might be ignored in stronger coalitions) makes this an inherently unstable government. (For an analysis of the domestic political consequences of the elections and the domestic issues that contribute to the coalition’s fragility, see here.)

These two factors are also likely to shape the way this government pursues its foreign policy. So, what can we expect?

The main expectation is that this government is unlikely to make any progress towards a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians. This is, unfortunately, an over-determined outcome. For their part, the Palestinians are both weakened as a negotiating partner by the persistent split between Fatah and Hamas, and appear to have decided that their outside options (in the form of recognition by the international community, an appeal to the International Criminal Court, and increasing European pressure on Israel) are more likely to lead to tangible results than negotiations. For his part, Netanyahu has clearly backed away from his (always tepid) support for a two-state solution.

The makeup of the current government makes it even more unlikely that the two sides would be able to reach the negotiating table, much less reach any agreement even if they could be forced to the table (as President H.W. Bush did with Yitzhak Shamir and the Madrid talks in 1992). The reason for this lies in the dependence of Netanyahu’s coalition on the settlers and on each and every member of his fragile coalition. There are prominent members of Netanyahu’s own party as well as the nationalist religious party that openly oppose a two-state solution, call for the

annexation of the West Bank to Israel, and would rather resign that support a the settlement freeze and\or release of Palestinian prisoners that have historically been the Palestinian conditions for resuming negotiations. If Netanyahu would attempt either of these, it is not hard to imagine one or two ideologically rigid backbenchers abandoning the coalition. Netanyahu, in other words, even if he wanted to sit down with the Palestinians in serious negotiations, would likely lose his government if he attempted to do so.

However, the Palestinians, the European Union, and individual European states are likely to increase the pressure on Israel to at least engage in negotiations. The Palestinian appeal to the International Criminal Court last month is one such lever. In what may herald increasing European pressure on Israel, France is preparing a draft U.N. Security Council resolution that would set parameters in terms of borders, Jerusalem, and refugees and a timeline for the end of the Israeli occupation.

The new Israeli government is likely to be handicapped in responding to these pressures for a number of reasons. First, as noted above, it is unlikely to have enough domestic leeway to make even symbolic gestures to assure the world, and the Palestinians, that it is committed to a negotiated two-state solution. If in the past the US and the world ignored Israel's settlement construction because it appeared that Israel was making progress towards a two-state solution, this option appears less likely given the current government.

Second, Israel's new Minister of Justice has been a vocal critic of Israel's judicial institutions and, in the past, has been committed to subordinating the judiciary to the Israeli legislature. This matters because, to the extent that she is successful and the Israeli judiciary becomes less independent, it may become less willing to genuinely carry out investigations into potential Israeli war crimes. This would increase the likelihood that the ICC would conclude that it has jurisdiction to investigate the Palestinian complaint about war crimes committed in the 2014 war in the Gaza Strip (See, article 17 of the Rome Statute).

The new government's main strategy is likely to consist of the argument that the challenges posed by ISIS, al-Qaeda, and the implosion of Syria are more pressing issues facing the world than the fate of the Palestinians, and that the economic development of the Occupied Territories, rather than any political settlement, should be the order of the day. This argument, however, is relatively unlikely to carry, especially in Europe (not to mention Ramallah). Aware of the difficult diplomatic times ahead, and especially sensitive to the possibility that Europe might increase its trade sanctions on Israel (see, for example the growing attempt to label all goods manufactured in the Occupied Territories), Israel is seeking to diversify its trading portfolio. This helps explain Israel's presence as a founding member of the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. However, since the EU is Israel's largest trading partner (in 2013, for example, it accounted for almost 31% of Israel's international trade, while China accounted for 6.1%), this is unlikely to make a substantial difference in the short or medium term.

Finally, on the issue of the Iranian nuclear program, the new Israeli government is likely to swallow the deal between Iran and the Unites States if one is ultimately reached. However, it is likely to do what it can to spoil it in the US congress. The new Israeli government, importantly, has few opponents of this approach, despite the risks of embroiling Israel in domestic American politics. Regardless of whether this tactic will be ultimately successful on the particular issue of Iran, it is likely to exacerbate the trend of the politicization of support for Israel in the United States. If this trend continues, it could have significant implications for US support of Israel in the future.

About the author:

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