

## Opinion

### *Israel and the permanent siege: The people have spoken - who will find an answer to the needs of the voters?*

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The election campaign for the 21st Knesset, the Israeli parliament, was a polarizing and exhausting one. Many observers spoke about a campaign without content but characterized by personal attacks and defamations. In April 2019, it was no wonder that many Israelis were simply glad that it is over.

Since Israel is a parliamentary democracy, the executive branch of the government draws its authority from parliament (the legislative branch) and needs its confidence to continue. Therefore, the prime minister is not chosen directly by the voters but by a process of bargaining among the various fractions elected to parliament. In Israel, no single party holds a majority of the seats in parliament, and thus the process of forming a government is longer and more complicated. One peculiarity of the electoral system is the fact that the President of the State, Reuven Rivlin, consults with representatives of all the parties elected to the Knesset to choose the prime

minister. He decided, in spring 2019, to charge Benjamin Netanyahu with the task of forming the government.<sup>1</sup>

Approximately 68% of eligible voters cast their ballot for one of 40 parties on election day, 9 April 2019. Although Benjamin Netanyahu's ruling Likud Party and the new Blue-White alliance gained 35 seats each in the 120 – member parliament, the character of Israel's electoral system reduced Blue-White leader Benny Gantz's chances of success to highly improbable.

Unfortunately, Israeli voters did not get a break for long. Since Netanyahu was unable to form a government, the Israelis had to vote again on 17 September 2019. Although Netanyahu's Likud Party got 32 seats and Blue-White 33, Rivlin asked him to try anew to form a government. Netanyahu again failed to form a government for the second time. And while Benny Gantz from the Blue-White Alliance has a try at building a government, the fact remains that voters supported, despite all problems in domestic policies and accusations due to corruption, Netanyahu and his Likud party to a large extent.

The main reason may be the fact that voters support the government in times of crisis. The Israeli Democracy Institute stresses that Israel faces great challenges: (a) to preserve a free society under conditions of permanent siege; (b) to craft a proper balance between competing values - the imperative of preserving Israel's national security on the one hand, and the need to protect human rights and civil liberties on the other; and (c) Israel's international legitimacy in the struggle against terrorism.<sup>2</sup> Since Netanyahu sees himself as *Mr Security* and many Israelis tend to believe him, it may be understandable why Israeli voters casted their ballots for him and his right wing alliance. Although democracies need change, one part of Israeli society decided to '*rally round the flag*' in uncertain times.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information and elections details see: Joshua Krasna, "It looks like Netanyahu did it again" (2019) in: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/04/it-looks-like-netanyahu-has-done-it-again/> (22.04.2019).

<sup>2</sup> For more information see: *Israeli Democracy Institute, Center for Security and Democracy* in: <https://en.idi.org.il/centers/1158> (20.04.2019).

Lippner appoints the main issues in these times of crisis as follows:

(a) On the security front, Israelis will look to their leaders, first and foremost, to provide an effective response to heightened tensions with Hamas, including the recent launch of rockets from the Gaza Strip into Israel's heartland. Iran will figure in this discourse as well. (b) Diplomatically, Israelis have been engaged in a broad debate about the possible contours and roll-out of a Trump-inspired plan for Middle East peace. [...] Netanyahu will have to chart a cautious course between preserving his close cooperation with the White House and withstanding pressure from members of his political base to reject any US regional designs that might run afoul of their aspirations. (c) Netanyahu's legal troubles will soon be back in the headlines. The prime minister — who is facing charges on multiple counts of bribery, fraud, and breach of trust — is slated to appear for a hearing before Israel's attorney-general within the next few months, hoping to stave off formal indictment (Lippner 2019).

Focussing on security issues which go mostly hand in hand with diplomacy issues, the new government, whenever it is finally in place, will face a long list of challenges. These challenges have not changed very much over the last years while Netanyahu was in power, but as mentioned above, Israelis voters decided to stay with the known. The main threats Israel is facing are Iran, Syria as well as Gaza and the Palestinians.

Another aspect in Middle Eastern policy is that this policy was at no time limited to the area of the Middle East but other powers like the US, Russia and the EU were and still are very involved. Therefore, Israeli security policy cannot be analysed without referring to the policies of those powers as well.

## **Iran**

The central threat facing is still Iran and its proxies. Iran poses a threat to Israel in different dimensions. The most obvious danger posed is the establishment of a front against Israel in Syria with Hizbullah and Shiite militias. However, Iran threatens Israel by means of its ongoing attempts to acquire nuclear weapons and ballistic missile

capabilities. It also tries to control an area from the Mediterranean to Yemen (Gilead et al 2018).

Iran's territorial control is aided by the "removal or significant weakening of its main enemies – the Taliban in Afghanistan, Saddam Hussein in Iraq, and most recently, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria" (Shine; Zimmt 2018: 18). Within the last several years, the objectives set by Iran in the region have been achieved. The Assad regime in Syria is still in power and the Iranian presence in Syria is established. As well, the land bridge from Iran through Iraq and Lebanon has been created. Hence Israel is slowing being surrounded by an Iranian rampart, an imposing threat. By rebuilding Syrian military industries, Iran is establishing infrastructure to serve Hizbullah. This activities have led to friction with Israel as it is determined to prevent Iranian military entrenchment in Syria. Therefore, Israel attacked transfers of weapons to support Hizbullah and infrastructure in Syria several times. On the 26 August 2018, the Iranian Minister of Defense signed a defense and cooperation agreement with his counterpart in Damascus, which will lead to growing tensions with Israel.<sup>3</sup> Shine and Zimmt stressed in 2018: "Iran's ongoing determination to entrench itself in Syria – and Israel's determination to prevent this – presents high potential for military escalation."

In this light, the latest developments are concerning since Israel is responding to the pressure Iran is applying through diplomatic channels, e.g. via the US or France to make sure Iran is warned. In April 2019, US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, argued that the assumed new planned missile production facility by the Iranian proxy, Hizbullah in Lebanon, would constitute a threat to Lebanon and Israel. These concerns had already been voiced Israeli President Rivlin in January 2019 and he urged French President Macron to use France's diplomatic bonds to convince the government in Lebanon to contain Hizbullah.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For more information see <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-syria-defence-minister/iran-and-syria-sign-deal-for-military-cooperation-idUSKCN1LC0GL> (20.04.2019).

<sup>4</sup> For more information see: France said to tell Lebanon: Israel won't tolerate Iranian – backed missile plant, in: Times of Israel, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/france-said-to-tell-lebanon-israel-wont-tolerate-iranian-backed-missile-plant/> (20.04.2019)

In May 2018, US President Trump announced US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and the renewal of sanctions on Iran.<sup>5</sup> The European members of the JCPOA describe it as essential to their national security to keep the arrangement. In September 2018, in the UN General Assembly, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini announced a Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) as an alternative route for money transfers, to tackle the US sanctions and facilitate trade with Iran.<sup>6</sup>

As for the Iranian nuclear program, as long as it does not advance Israel can benefit from the continuing restrictions. However, since Iran decide to withdraw from the agreement, resume uranium enrichment and installation of advanced centrifuges, and reduce IAEA supervision to a minimum, Israel has to deal with a new situation, where its position is not supported by European countries. Indeed, many of these states see Israel as part of the problem created by Trump's exit from the JCPOA, while the United States for its part sees no immediate threat in the progress of the nuclear program as long as it remains within parameters that do not constitute a breakout to nuclear weapons. In any case, the United States are not keen to put the military option on a higher footing (Shine and Zimmt 2018: 28).

But due to the latest developments and tensions between Iran and the US, this view might be obsolete.

Additionally, the cooperation between Russia and Iran in Syria has intensified in the last years. To Russia, Iran was and remains a strategic ally in the region (Gilead et al 2018). Therefore, Israel needs to develop an answer not only to the European countries but also to Russia. US unilateral moves, e.g. with regard to the JCPOA and the possible abandonment of the region to the hands of Iran and Russia, forces an Israeli answer (Dekel 2018). This answer was found in the establishing of a mechanism in 2015

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<sup>5</sup> For more information see: President Donald J. Trump is Ending United States Participation in an Unacceptable Iran Deal, in: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-ending-united-states-participation-unacceptable-iran-deal/> (20.04.2019).

<sup>6</sup> For more information see: Remarks by HR/VP Mogherini following a Ministerial Meeting of E3/EU + 2 and Iran, Bruxelles, 24/09/2018 - 23:33, UNIQUE ID: 180925\_3; [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/51040/remarks-hrvp-mogherini-following-ministerial-meeting-e3eu-2-and-iran\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/51040/remarks-hrvp-mogherini-following-ministerial-meeting-e3eu-2-and-iran_en) (19.04.2019).

between Russia and Israel, which allows Israel to conduct air strikes on Hizbullah positions and convoys without interference by Russian air defence (Averbukh, Klein 2018: 5).

Ambitious, Iran is pursuing the goal of becoming a regional hegemon, which threatens the entire regional peace and security construction in the Middle East. Iran wants to change the regional balance of power and undermine Israeli deterrence capability as well as the standing of the Sunni–Arab countries in the region (Gilead et al 2018). The destruction of Israel is, therefore, only one goal among others. Besides diplomatic answers Shine and Zimmt call for the Israeli preparation “for the possibility of having to demonstrate a credible military option, if only for deterrence.” (Shine and Zimmt 2018: 29)

However, US involvement is required to bolster Israeli security in the Middle East, . For example, Israel, on its own, cannot e.g. block the Iranian land bridge between Iraq and Syria. It needs American help. The close relationship between Israel and the US reflects the strengthening of the cooperation between both countries. However, given the unpredictability of the Trump administration, this close bond may come under pressure at some point in time. Certainly, the withdrawal of US troops from Northern Syria in October 2019, the Turkish military action and possible other incalculable actions by the Trump administration have an impact on Israel. Since any diminishment of the American regional position and influence adversely affect Israel’s strategic posture.

## **Syria**

When President Trump declared that the Golan Heights were part of the Israeli territory in March 2019, Benjamin Netanyahu announced a new chapter in Israeli history. On 25 March 2019, Trump signed a presidential proclamation recognizing

Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights. This occurred more than 37 years after the Knesset ratified a bill in December 1981 extending Israeli jurisdiction over this area<sup>7</sup>.

Withdrawal from the Golan has never been a popular proposition in Israel. Polling in Israel over the past decade has consistently shown that at least two thirds of the respondents opposed any withdrawal from the Golan Heights, even in the context of a peace treaty with Syria, and the severance of its alliance with Iran and Hizbullah (Kransa 2019 b). On one hand, his position is based on security considerations, mainly the need for Israel to retain the commanding Heights to prevent the resumption of attacks on its citizens. On the other hand, there is the claimed legitimacy of annexing territory taken in a defensive war. It is much less to do with ideological or religious claims. Therefore, President Trump's decision follows a long-term desire of the majority of Israelis and certainly this measure was accredited by the voters to Nethanyahu as well.

Brom stresses that US recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan does not "have immediate security ramifications, and presumably Syria will avoid direct military confrontation with Israel now," (Brom 2019) but the option to use military force against Israel will stay on the table. Eventually the attempt might increase. It may also be that the US recognition will push Syria to build an infrastructure for attacks on the Golan Heights. At this point, it is speculative but since Iran and its proxies are already engaged in a limited military confrontation with Israel on Syrian soil, it is likely that President Trump's proclamation will have an impact on the balance of the region.

The measure clashes with the commonly held position in international law, anchored in the UN Charter, that a country's sovereignty and territorial integrity must be respected, and that wartime acquisition of territory does not confer a right to sovereignty over that territory. Therefore, the international community - as well as countries in the region, including those with relations with Israel - will most likely continue to oppose the American measure" (Brom 2019). Nevertheless the recognition of Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights was well received by most of the Israeli

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<sup>7</sup> For more information see: The Golan Heights Law, in: <https://mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/peace/guide/pages/golan%20heights%20law.aspx> (21.04.2019).

public and since it happened only a few days before the election the voters gave Netanyahu credit for the US measure. (Cubbison 2019)

As Dekel stresses, Trump's decision also abandons the Middle East to Russian dominance (Dekel 2019) and, regardless of the US impact on Israeli security aspects, Russia is another player in Syria affecting Israeli security policy.

The Russian intervention in Syria created a need for Israel as well as for Russia to avoid unintentional military clashes by establishing functioning communication channels and dependable arrangements. To this end, the two states set up a de-conflicting mechanism in autumn 2015. It is embedded in a format of frequent high-level discussions between the Russian president and the Israeli prime minister, as well as between the defence ministers and intelligence service chiefs (Averbukh; Klein 2018: 5).

Although some observers have already seen a problem in this arrangement (Averbukh; Klein 2018: 5), reality today paints a different picture. Beginning in 2018, Iranian fighters have been stationed in Syria. In May 2018, Russian President Putin called for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Syria, except, of course, for Russian troops who is there on the invitation of the Syrian regime. There is some thought that Russia may be willing to take account of Israeli security interests. (Kramer 2018)<sup>8</sup> Following military and security experts from Israel, Russia does not appear interested in turning Syria into an arena of direct and fullblown military confrontation between Israel and Iran (Gilead et al 2018)

### **Gaza and the Palestinians**

While Israel was searching for a new government and preparing itself for international events like the Eurovision Song Contest, Hamas took the opportunity to open a new round in its struggle with Israel. By the end of April and at the beginning of May 2019, about 700 projectiles were shot into Israel. Israel responded with hundreds of

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<sup>8</sup> Additionally Russia seems to accept Israeli military activity designed to undermine Iran's military entrenchment in Syria and to prevent the transfer of advanced weaponry to Hezbollah in Lebanon (Gilead 2018).



airstrikes. Four Israelis were killed, as were 29 Gazans, including at least 11 members of terror groups. Egypt, Qatar and the UN played a lead role in brokering talks on a truce between Israel and Hamas and reaching agreements to end the flareups that have broken out periodically between both parties (so called *March of Return* border protests in Gaza) since March 2018. The authorities in Israel were pressed to end the fighting before the national holidays in Israel (Israel Independence Day and Israel Memorial Day) and Israel's hosting of the Eurovision Song Contest. But it was unclear if and when the fighting might resume.<sup>9</sup> Israel and Hamas were once again on the brink of war during the summer of 2019. Given the low chances of achieving a political breakthrough, Israel is now focused primarily on responding to security risks. In the future, however, trends in the Palestinian arena indicate an increasing chance of escalation, both in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (Dekel 2018: 56).

For the residents of southern Israel, the permanent siege is a huge problem. A report by NATAL, Israel Trauma and Resiliency Center, found that Israelis increasingly are suffering from symptoms of traumatic stress due to frequently being targeted with rockets from Gaza Strip. During the latest flareup, the helpline of NATAL received more than 1000 calls. But it is not only the projectiles that are at the root of the suffering. More important are the weekly protests and often violent Palestinian riots on the Israel–Gaza border since March 2018. The residents, not only in southern Israel but also in the northern area where rockets from Lebanon fired by Hizbullah into Israeli territory, are living and growing up under a continuous security threat. The increase in the number of calls to the helpline reflects the mindset and mental state of the citizens. (Bachner 2019)

Thus, Gaza and the conflict with the Palestinians is the most stressful one for Israel. The Palestinian system is in a deep crisis. The veteran Palestinian leadership, especially Abbas, and his followers, which endorse a political solution to the conflict and security cooperation with Israel, is declining. The waning of the veteran leadership might lead to an extremism and increase the attractiveness of Hamas (Gilead et al 2018). Also, an internal Palestinian split as well as the crisis in the Gaza Strip lead to an increasing aggravation of the situation between Israel and the Palestinians. In case of

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<sup>9</sup> For more information see: "Israel reopens Gaza crossings after border clashes fail to derail ceasefire," *Times of Israel*, 12 May 2019.

Palestinian Authority (PA ) leadership of the and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO ) by Hamas, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict could perpetuate and significantly harm Israel’s national security (Gilead et al 2018).

The US government under Trump declared, at the beginning of his administration, a peace initiative. But if this initiative, if and when it is made public in its entirety (the political portion is expected for end of November 2019), offers an arrangement that does not meet the most minimal Palestinian expectations, it could lead to a direct violent confrontation between Israel and the Palestinians. The question remains as to how the Arab countries will react in such a case (Gilead et al 2018). Other actors in the region also play a role when it comes to the so called *day after Abbas*. Regional actors such as Iran, Turkey, and the Salafi jihadist organizations are liable to take advantage of the opportunity as forces accelerating instability. In their view, Abbas’s departure will be a propitiously timed window of opportunity to undermine the Palestinian system and reshape it according to their preferences, under Hamas’s leadership. This situation creates a security, economic, and demographic threat to Israel (Dekel 2018: 74).

At the moment, both the PA and the Israeli leaderships have positioned themselves in a comfortable space known as the *status quo*, which does not require them to make difficult decisions but rather to continue managing the conflict. The Palestinians will continue to promote full international recognition of a Palestinian state and the new Israeli government will not make any decisions until the issue of Abbas’s successor is clarified as Dekel estimates (Dekel 2018: 74).

Israel’s current policy on the Palestinian question, Hamas and the Gaza Strip is nothing more than conflict management without any clear strategic perception.

### **The people have spoken – but how to answer?**

In November 2019, Israel is still searching for a new government. If the main challenges Israel faces are (a) to preserve a free society under conditions of permanent siege; (b) to craft a proper balance between competing values - the imperative of preserving Israel's national security on the one hand, and the need to protect human

rights and civil liberties on the other; and (c) Israel's international legitimacy in the struggle against terrorism, as the Israeli Democracy Institut underlines, the situation for Israel and its citizens remains difficult.

To manage these difficulties, the new government will have to find some answers to the urgent problems. It will have to specify strategic objectives and implement them.

First and foremost, the situation with the Palestinians needs to be dealt with. Since Hamas is a terrorist organization Israel needs to be prepared for anything in any confrontation with Hamas. To preserve a free society under conditions of permanent siege means that Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) need to bolster their deterrence and operational readiness, including preparing the home front for war (Gilead et al 2018). However, Israel also faces threats from Iran, not to mention Hizbullah and Syria. Therefore, an even deeper dialogue and strategic partnership with the US might be necessary; not only with the Trump administration but also with other political parties or politicians in the US.

The case of Gaza is a perfect example to illustrate Israel efforts to craft a balance between competing values. On the one hand, Israel tries to prevent a greater humanitarian crisis in Gaza by supporting Egyptian and UN mediation efforts and encouraging Qatar to transfer funds and fuel to Gaza (Kibik; Goren 2018) and, on the other hand, Israel works to prevent international recognition of Hamas and to maintain the split between the West Bank and Gaza and to undermine the strategic plan of Hamas to take over the PLO and PA.

The confrontation with the Palestinians needs to be dealt with at a strategic level and has to become more than just conflict management. But it is unlikely that anyone will present a strategy before the Trump administration explains their offer and as long as Abbas stays in power. The people in the south of Israel, living under fire, will have to wait patiently for any kind of solution as they have for the last several years.

To underline Israel's international legitimacy in the struggle against terrorism, Israel needs more allies than just the US. Israel may need to coordinate even more with Russia and Arab countries, such as Egypt and Jordan, with whom Israel has existing peace treaties. Ties with other partners like Greece and Cyprus need to be strengthened.

Israel signed agreements with these European countries to advance a joint gas pipeline and also to cooperate on security, diplomatic, diaspora, environmental and cultural affairs (Kibrik; Goren 2018).

To sum up – it remains interesting if and how the new Israeli government, however it may look like, will be able and willing to find the right answer to the above issues as well as voters' wishes. Focussing on the Israeli – Palestinian conflict, two main options are on the table: separation on all levels or annexing the West Bank. While separation would imply the division of Israel, annexing implies taking responsibility for 2.5 million Palestinians. Trump's announced *deal* does not be a game-changer either. Following the findings of the National Security Index of INSS at Tel Aviv University the Israeli public is interested and supports the separation and the two - state solution with 58 %<sup>10</sup>. Separation from the Palestinians is the preferred way to prevent a one – state solution and help to solidify Israel as a safe and democratic Jewish state based on moral values, human rights and civil liberties. The question remains if selfdeclared *Mr Security* is the right man to do so or who else may finally have the determination to act.

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<sup>10</sup> For more information see: The 12th Annual International Conference, Summary and Insights, in:INSS, online publications, [https://www.b-way.co.il/2019/inss\\_en/#p=14](https://www.b-way.co.il/2019/inss_en/#p=14) (15.05.2019).

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