



# **The Election Results and Israel's Foreign Relations**

**Initial reactions by Mitvim Institute experts**

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**The right-wing victory in the Israeli election is likely to have significant impact on Israel's foreign policy, specifically on ties with the US and the Palestinians. Statements made in the immediate days after the election by major actors in the international community already indicate that future crises are looming. This document features initial reactions to the election results and their possible implications for Israel's foreign relations by experts at [Mitvim – The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies](#) – Dr. Nimrod Goren, Kamal-Ali Hassan, Dr. Ilai Saltzman, Dr. Dahlia Scheindlin, and Dr. Ido Zelkovitz.**

## **A. Two contrasting views of Israel and the world**

**Dr. Dahlia Scheindlin:** “The recent election showed that Israel is divided in two. The election was not just a referendum on Netanyahu’s personality and performance. It was a struggle between two contradicting worldviews. The worldview that Netanyahu upholds, and which is supported by half the population, is characterized by fear of external enemies who apparently threaten Israel’s existence, the notion that Israel only has itself to rely on, the tendency toward insularity and isolationism in the face of the international community, and the preference of identity issues over materialistic considerations. The second half of the nation, on the other hand, fears being barricaded due to international isolation, yearns to improve the material quality of life, and feels secure in its identity. For this half, security threats—through real—do not constitute an excuse to delay dealing with everyday socio-economic problems. Given this conflict in worldviews, Netanyahu sowed the seeds of factionalism among the public during this election, provoking strong emotions—both positive and negative. His supporters backed him by a large majority, and his opponents despised him. The worldview of Netanyahu won and in the coming years will likely continue to be strengthened in accordance with the demographic trends in Israel. The Netanyahu government, together with its ideological partners, will try to further instill its worldview among segments of Israeli society—through cultural and educational institutions, the media, public discourse, and continuous statements of the heads of state as well as legislation.” **(Dr. Dahlia Scheindlin is a pollster**

**and political consultant in Israel and abroad. She conducted strategic research for the Zionist Union's campaign in the 2015 Israeli election, and is also a member of the Mitvim Institute's Foreign Policy Advisory Team)**

## **B. Toward further tensions in Israel-US relations**

**Dr. Ilai Saltzman:** “Netanyahu and Obama will now need to deal with each other for another 21 months, and it appears that the President intends to intensify his attitude toward Netanyahu's future government. This can be expressed by withholding an American veto on resolutions in the Security Council regarding Palestinian independence or parameters for ending the conflict. Netanyahu's rejection of the two-state solution before the elections puts Washington and Jerusalem on a head-on collision course, and Netanyahu's subsequent attempts to retract these statements are not convincing the American administration. Moreover, reports that a nuclear deal with Iran is at hand, and that the administration plans to bring it to the Security Council for approval in order to avert opposition in Congress, is placing Netanyahu in a weak position and in effect neutralizes Israel's role in the decision-making process regarding Iran's nuclear program. Since Netanyahu does not want to, nor is able to, order an Israeli attack on Iran without US backing at this time, the result is American exclusivity with regards to the negotiations with Iran. In light of the profound disagreement between Israel and the US on Iran and the Palestinian issue, we are likely to witness a further deterioration of relations between the two countries, even if in public Netanyahu will seek to play down this trend. Netanyahu's political triumph, in this sense, is a Pyrrhic victory with regard to Israeli foreign and defense policy.” **(Dr. Ilai Saltzman is a Member of the Board at the Mitvim Institute and a lecturer for International Relations at Claremont McKenna College in the US)**

## **C. Stagnation in the peace process might lead to escalation**

**Dr. Ido Zelkowitz:** “The election results do not bode well for the peace process. A right-wing/ultra-Orthodox coalition will not allow the resumption of negotiations with the Palestinians, and will thus eliminate the possibility of promoting regional diplomatic initiatives. Without an Israeli-Palestinian dialogue taking place, radicalization may take hold. While Hamas does not see any Israeli government as a counterpart for negotiations, the Palestinian Authority does, but will make extensive efforts to paint the Israeli government in the eyes of the world as rejecting peace. The Palestinian Authority may try to join more international conventions and to take unilateral steps that will increase pressure on Israel. Continued Israeli construction in the settlements is liable to lead to some grassroots Palestinian resistance. Additionally, without progress on the reconstruction of Gaza, Hamas may renew violence, which will assist it to win over the public from the Palestinian Authority. It is in Israel's interest to reach out to the moderate Arab countries and to promote a regional solution to the Palestinian issue. This will also contribute to Israel's efforts to stop Iran's nuclear

program. Otherwise, without progress on the Palestinian track, Israel will face, as stated above, broader international pressure and the relations between its government and the White House will continue to be murky. Such developments would harm Israel's national security and might undermine the defense umbrella currently provided by the US government to the State of Israel." **(Dr. Ido Zelkovitz is a Policy Fellow at the Mitvim Institute, a member of the Institute's Foreign Policy Advisory Team, and a visiting professor at the University of Minnesota in the US)**

#### **D. A new political era for the Arab citizens of Israel**

**Kamal Ali-Hassan:** "The election for the 20th Knesset was historic in terms of the central role filled by the Arab citizens of Israel. A right-wing victory is already commonplace in Israel. However, the establishment of the Joint (Arab) List and it becoming the third largest party is a new phenomenon, which will have an influence on both domestic politics and foreign affairs. The Joint List will try to solve, or at least ameliorate, some of the conditions plaguing the Arab citizens of Israel. Additionally, it also has great potential and legitimacy to engage with regional actors and with the international community. Prior to the elections, there appeared to be a dramatic change in the relationship between the Left in Israel and the Arabs. The Joint List and left-wing parties did not succeed in coordinating joint political moves. If it was assumed the Arabs would be natural allies with the Left, this election highlighted the differences in their perceptions. On the other hand, the leadership of Ayman Odeh, head of the Joint List, is such that reaches out to the Left and that uses a terminology with which the Left can identify. Odeh expressed support for signing the pre-election surplus agreement with Meretz (which was eventually blocked due to opposition within the Joint List), and hinted he was prepared to recommend Herzog as Prime Minister if such a move would be essential to blocking the formation of a right-wing government. Despite the differences, there may exist here a chance for the constructing of a real partnership between the Arabs and the Left in Israel, through coordinating actions in the Knesset and in the Israeli society as a whole." **(Kamal Ali-Hassan is a Policy Fellow at the Mitvim Institute, a member of the Institute's Foreign Policy Advisory Team, and a lecturer on the Arab society in Israel at the Open University of Israel)**

#### **E. Continuation of strained Israel-Turkey relations**

**Dr. Nimrod Goren:** "In the four years that have passed since the Turkish flotilla incident, Netanyahu and Erdoğan have had several opportunities to normalize Israel-Turkey relations. Alas, this has not happened. Netanyahu was concerned by the reactions of his coalition partners, and sought guarantees that Erdoğan will not continue to verbally attack Israel. Erdoğan, for his part, stepped up his rhetoric against Israel during the 2014 war in Gaza, in some cases equating Israel with the Nazis. There is currently a complete lack of trust between Netanyahu and Erdoğan. A breakthrough in Israel-Turkey relations is not likely

under the context of a new right-wing Israeli government and of increased international pressure on Israel regarding the Palestinian issue. Moreover, ahead of the Turkish general elections in June, Turkish criticism against Israel may reach new peaks, as has been the case during previous political campaigns there. The continuation of strained relations between Israel and Turkey will prevent the two countries from cooperating on the issue of Eastern Mediterranean natural gas. It might even damage trade relations between the countries, which were on the rise in recent years despite the political tensions. In light of these expectations, channels of policy dialogue carried out by unofficial actors in Israel and Turkey will be of increased importance in the coming period. Such channels will continue to enable both sides to convey messages to each other, to jointly analyze events and changes in the Middle East, and to continuously seek opportunities for improving bilateral ties. The US, as an ally of both Israel and Turkey, should also act to try and prevent further deterioration in Israel-Turkey relations, and to set up further communication mechanisms between officials from both countries.” **(Dr. Nimrod Goren is Chairman of the Mitvim Institute, member of the institute's Foreign Policy Advisory Team, and a lecturer for Middle Eastern Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem)**