

The Israeli Election Results and Israel's Foreign Policy

Commentaries by Mitvim Institute Experts

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Benjamin Netanyahu won Israel's election and declared he would form a new right-wing government. This will affect diverse aspects of Israel's foreign policy. This document includes commentaries by Mitvim Institute experts regarding the election results and their possible foreign policy implications: Dr. Ehud Eiran argues that while Netanyahu presented himself ahead of the election as a super-diplomat, he also proved he is part of the global populist wave; Dr. Nimrod Goren claims that Israel's right-wing government will have more leeway to implement its policies given weak domestic and foreign opposition; Dr. Roei Kibrik foresees increased tensions between Israel and leading global democratic forces; Dr. Lior Lehrs explains why the new government will face the threat of flare-ups at several Israeli-Palestinian flashpoints; Dr. Moran Zaga points out why Netanyahu constitutes an obstacle to promoting ties with Gulf States, as does the lack of a broad Israel strategy on relations with the Arab world; Former Ambassador Michael Harari claims that renewed peace process with the Palestinians is needed to take advantage of global and regional opportunities; Kamal Ali-Hassan assesses that Israel's Arab population is losing trust in the state establishment and will seek to promote regional ties on its own; Dr. Eyal Ronen urges the new government to deepen its partnership with the EU rather than to continue its efforts to weaken and divide it; Yael Patir argues that Israel's crisis with the US Democratic Party could deepen, especially as the 2020 presidential election draws near.

While presenting himself as a super-diplomat, Netanyahu also proved he is part of the global populist wave

Dr. Ehud Eiran

Board Member at the Mitvim Institute and lecturer at Haifa University

Ahead of the election, Netanyahu chose to highlight his foreign relations achievements as justification for his continued hold on power. Giant billboards depicted him standing alongside President Donald Trump. Aides pointed to his diplomatic achievements, including US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and the close ties he had forged with major world leaders. Once the voting was over, Netanyahu posed for a photo-op with close associates under a giant picture showing him meeting with Chinese leader Xi Jin Ping. The Prime Minister also scheduled a series of visits and events to highlight his position as a super-diplomat ahead of the election. These included the inauguration of a Hungarian trade office in Jerusalem, a statement by Romania's Prime Minister in support of moving its embassy to Jerusalem, Trump's recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights, and a visit by the newly elected President of Brazil. Capping his activity was a meeting with

Russian President Putin in Moscow prior to the return of the remains of Zachary Baumel, an Israeli soldier killed in the 1980's Lebanon war.

Previous election campaigns did not accord the foreign policy achievements of Israeli leaders a particularly prominent position. Netanyahu's spotlight on these activities could point to his limited success on other central issues, such as defense and the economy. Netanyahu rose to prominence in the diplomatic arena, especially in the field of public diplomacy, serving as Israel's deputy chief of mission in the US, Israeli ambassador to the UN and deputy foreign minister. Netanyahu echoes the diplomatic style of the Revisionist movement in the Zionist movement's pre-state times, which stressed grandiose public gestures, contacts and understandings with world leaders and dramatic speeches before international fora. His diplomatic flowering occurred simultaneously with the wilting of Israel's foreign ministry during his tenure. Netanyahu dramatically weakened the ministry, refraining from appointing a full-time foreign minister, and withholding support for the diplomats' pay demands, leading them to even go on strike.

Netanyahu thus positioned himself as "a king-diplomat", according to a term coined by Prof. Piki Ish-Shalom: a leader who controls the daily diplomatic agenda while bypassing professional diplomats and civil servants. On the eve of the election, Netanyahu even boasted that Trump "gave" him the Golan Heights, as if it were a deal between people rather than a policy move between states. Netanyahu actions and alliances prove that he is part of the global populist wave. He brings to the populist club a particular emphasis of his own – the foreign relations angle.

The next government is likely to face week domestic and foreign opposition, giving it leeway to implement policies

Dr. Nimrod Goren

Head of the Mitvim Institute and lecturer at the Hebrew University

Netanyahu is on his way to forming another right-wing government, one with a clear majority and with far-right members in significant ministerial positions. Such a government is likely to continue the path of Israel's current foreign policy. Netanyahu, who in 2009 paid lip-service to the two-state solution, is now speaking openly about annexation of settlements. Whether or not he will actually follow through on that, his next government will probably further tighten Israel's grip over Palestinian territories and work to prevent prospects of establishing a viable Palestinian state.

US President Trump, who is closely aligned with Netanyahu, is expected to give him leeway to carry out such policies. While the EU is less able than it has been in the past of reaching consensus against Netanyahu's policies, it may well be that only a Democratic administration in the US, should one be elected in 2020, will present and enforce some red lines. This is also due to the fact that Netanyahu will not face significant domestic opposition on foreign policy and national security issues. The two major pro-peace parties, Labor and Meretz, will have – combined – fewer than 10 percent of the seats in the Knesset. The major opposition party Blue and White – which reached a major achievement for a first-time political run – does not endorse the two-state solution, and includes some right-wing hard-liners on the Palestinian issue. In general, many Members of Knesset who focused on foreign policy issues will not be returning to the legislature. Lawmakers with different agendas will replace them.

Prior to the election, Netanyahu portrayed himself as a master-statesman and highlighted his relations with major world leaders, mostly populist and anti-liberal ones. This trend is likely to continue, further eroding the democratic component of Israel's foreign relations. The next foreign minister will have to point to the damage it has brought and undertake a policy shift. Despite its weakness, the Israeli opposition – in parliament as well as in civil society – should present a clear alternative vision to Israel's foreign relations, one that seeks to advance peace with the Palestinians, increase Israel's regional belonging in Europe and the Middle East, and anchor Israel to the club of liberal democracies. Mobilizing support for such a vision may not be an easy task given the political climate, but the Israeli public, as well as Israel's friends around the world, need to know that there is more to Israel and its foreign relations than Netanyahu, and that a different path is still possible.

Tensions between Israel and global democratic forces are expected to continue and intensify

Dr. Roe Kibrik

Director of Research at the Mitvim Institute

International institutions and democratic states were critical of Israel's policies throughout Netanyahu's previous term. It started on the day of the 2015 election, when Netanyahu warned against the Arab voters "flocking in droves" to the ballot boxes. It continued with the government's attempts to expel African refugees, its deepening of the occupation and creeping annexation, the Nationality Law, and the law legitimizing expropriation of Palestinian land. Along with Netanyahu's revocation of a promise to allow pluralistic prayer at the Western Wall, persecution of human rights organizations, attacks on the judicial system, cozying up to anti-liberal regimes, wrangling over the memory of the Holocaust – all generated criticism of Israel for distancing itself from the liberal-democratic ethos.

Israel's democracy came in for further criticism throughout the 2019 election campaign over the candidacy of a prime minister suspected of corruption and the legitimacy he granted to racist far-right candidates. The criticism may not have significant short-term repercussions, as the populist wave and global liberalism crisis allow Netanyahu to keep forging important international alliances. Most importantly with President Trump, who is himself challenging the liberal order, and with populist and authoritarian leaders around the world. The global democratic-liberal order is under attack everywhere, and thus the Israeli government has not had to pay a significant price for distancing itself from it.

However, among those democratic-liberal forces that do criticize Israel are its most important strategic partners: the countries of Western Europe, chief among them Germany, France and the UK, liberal Democrats in the US and the Jewish community there. Even traditional Netanyahu supporters have begun condemning Israel's movement away from democratic values under his aegis. The election results suggest that Netanyahu's next government will be very similar to his previous one, at least initially. It will rely on the support of the ultra-Orthodox and right-wing parties. The tensions and crises between Israel and leading global democratic forces are expected to continue and perhaps intensify given the nature of the emerging coalition, continued attacks on the courts and law enforcement, and Netanyahu's declared intention to promote the annexation of parts of the West Bank.

New government to face threat of flare-up on various Israeli-Palestinian flashpoints

Dr. Lior Lehirs

Director of the Mitvim Institute's Program on Israeli-Palestinian Peacemaking

The election results point to a dramatic weakening of the political parties espousing Israeli-Palestinian peace and the two-state solution. Support for the Labor and Meretz parties declined from an equivalent of 29 seats in the 2015 election, to 11 this time round. Support for the Arab parties dropped from 13 to 10 seats. At the same time, the parties affiliated with the settlement enterprise and with calls for territorial annexation and a change of the status quo on the Temple Mount did not garner as much support as the polls gave them. The Zehut party did not cross the 3.25 percent electoral threshold, nor apparently did the New Right party, while the United Right alliance will only have four seats. Nonetheless, the United Right will hold significant sway in the next Netanyahu government.

Ahead of the election, tensions emerged at several flashpoints in the Israeli-Palestinian arena, among them the Gaza Strip and the Bab-al-Rahma site on the Temple Mount/al-Haram al-Sharif, Palestinian inmates launching protests in Israeli jails, and Israel's withholding of tax funds from the Palestinian Authority continued to stir unrest. There were efforts to provide temporary responses to some of these issues until after the election, but stable solutions did not emerge and the new government will face the threat of further flare-up and escalation. Netanyahu's electoral achievement hands him tremendous power that includes a public mandate to promote a long-term deal with Hamas in Gaza, and perhaps some rhetorical or symbolic concessions over President Trump's future peace plan (for which Netanyahu is guaranteed broad Knesset support on the part of Blue and White, too). However, Netanyahu may also try to lead some annexation measures for the first time, having avoided doing so until now, in return for the support of right-wing parties for legislation that would guarantee him immunity from legal prosecution on corruption charges.

Netanyahu constitutes an obstacle to ties with the Gulf, as does the lack of strategy on ties with the Arab world

Dr. Moran Zaga

Policy Fellow at the Mitvim Institute and Research Fellow at Haifa University

The Gulf newspapers leave no room for doubt regarding their dissatisfaction with Netanyahu's re-election. In recent weeks, Gulf media have covered Israel's election campaign, especially the standing and involvement of Israel's Arab citizens, and displayed great interest in the new candidate, Benny Gantz. On the morning following the election, Gulf newspaper headlines blared that Israel had voted "[No to Peace, Yes to Corruption](#)", citing a comment to that effect by Dr. Saeb Erekat. Despite the cautious moves in recent years by some Gulf States toward rapprochement with Israel, Netanyahu appears to have a [negative image](#) problem in those states. His efforts to [visit an Arab state](#) on the eve of the election did not pan out, attesting to the glass ceiling of ties with Israel. This goes beyond the freeze in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, which senior Gulf officials have identified as the main obstacle to ties.

Israel could enhance the surprising rapprochement with the Gulf States if it were to formulate a broad strategy for its relationship with the Arab world, including a clear plan regarding civil,

economic and diplomatic cooperation. Different government bodies including the National Security Council and the Mossad, neither of which specialize in civil affairs, are tasked with managing these relationships. Israel, instead, should place the knowledge and implementation of Israeli-Arab ties within one agency, preferably one able to handle various type of cooperation and channels of communication. The few displays of normalization that we have experienced in recent years could disappear altogether if the next Netanyahu government leads a dramatic move to annex the West Bank (or parts of it) following President Trump's recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights. Such a move would constitute the main obstacle to Israel's efforts to warm ties with the Arab world. The way to prevent such deterioration lies in dialogue and coordination with the Palestinians.

Renewed peace process with the Palestinians needed to take advantage of global and regional opportunities

Amb. (ret.) Michael Harari

Policy Fellow at the Mitvim Institute and former Ambassador to Cyprus

The election results point to the direction in which Israeli society is heading and to the major challenges this entails. The election created a new, two-party political map. One is a veteran, experienced party, the other a new entity that will try to take root as a long-term political framework. This is a welcome and healthy development for Israeli society. In terms of foreign policy, it hones the question of how Israel will respond to the dramatic regional changes. The erosion of regional and international interest in the Palestinian-Israeli issue does not rule out the need for courageous Israeli decisions on its preferred resolution of the conflict. Time is not on Israel's side, despite what the outgoing government argued and possibly, what the incoming one will, too. Israel irresponsibly wasted the opportunities it was offered in recent years, both in the regional arena – a confluence of interests with Arab states stemming from regional upheavals and the Iranian challenge, and on the global stage – a US administration that provided Israel with extensive room to maneuver in order to shape convenient future terms for a deal with the Palestinians.

Israel must take advantage of the current opportunity, including in the Mediterranean arena where it has forged strategic relationships, to advance an open and realistic regional and international dialogue. Such dialogue could provide fresh insights, promote new avenues for cooperation and boost arrangements in line with most of Israel's interests. This great potential cannot be harnessed without striving for a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Renewal of the peace process and realization of the resulting diplomatic momentum should be a high priority for the new government. Israel must restore the moral compass that has been absent from its foreign relations in recent years. If it presumes to fulfill its role as "a light unto nations", Israel must shift its policy on relationships with problematic regimes whose record on human rights is less than impressive. An appropriate balance between strategic interests and moral considerations will strengthen Israel's national security, as well as its international standing and image.

Israel's Arab population, losing trust in the state, will seek to promote regional ties on its own

Kamal Ali-Hassan

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The low turnout of Arab voters stems from various reasons, but it expresses increasing disregard for, and disengagement from, the Israeli establishment. Netanyahu has worked systematically and successfully to undermine the legitimacy of Arab participation in Israel's democratic game. His message was received loud and clear. Even the political center and left declared they would not invite Arab parties to join a government coalition should they win the election. Once again, the election results have handed power to Netanyahu and the right-wing, which have sought all along to deny the country's Arab citizens political participation, legislated the discriminatory Nationality Law and refused to recognize minority rights. These moves have distanced the Arab public from the state even further.

This alienation is expected to strengthen the Arab community's search for other arenas of inclusion and alternative avenues of influence. Individuals, as well as business and civil society organizations, will boost their search for new opportunities in the Arab and Islamic arenas. The ties between Israel's Arab population with the Palestinian Authority, Jordan, the Gulf States and even Turkey will continue to expand – not via Arab Members of Knesset, but from the grassroots level. The Arab citizens of Israel will seek to develop trade relations, academic cooperation, tourism and other ties with countries of the region, and turn less and less to official Israeli channels to achieve its goals. Arab Members of Knesset will face a virtually impossible task. They could, for example, try to join Netanyahu's attempts to forge ties with Arab states, and even help in this endeavor while conditioning their help on improved conditions for the Arab population. But, they will also have to restore trust with their disappointed electoral base, doing this from deep in the opposition benches and with even less power than they had in the previous Knesset.

New government should deepen its partnership with EU rather than seek to weaken and divide it

Dr. Eyal Ronen

Researcher on Israel-EU relations at the Mitvim Institute

The political map emerging from Israel's 2019 election could offer an opportunity to re-examine Israel's foreign relations, and especially to highlight the need for a deeper Israeli partnership with the EU. Israel-EU ties have deteriorated in recent years on several levels – a weakening of the partnership based on basic democratic and liberal values, an undermining of the essence and strength of political and economic ties, and erosion of the importance attributed by Israeli public opinion to ties with the EU. With the election over, this could be the right time to forge a long-term vision of future ties between the two sides. Such a process should include a clear commitment on the part of the Government of Israel to change the negative public discourse it has been leading regarding the importance of ties with the EU and their nature. At the same time, it is important that the new government seek to create conditions for an intensified strategic dialogue with the EU.

The government would also do well to stop banking on divisions within the EU, on a weakening of the Union, on prioritizing stronger bilateral ties with the states of Eastern and

Central Europe rather than developing the relationship with the EU and its key Member States. The new government should also give the relevant ministries, chief among them the foreign and economic affairs ministries, a more significant role in designing and leading ties with EU institutions. In this context, it is important to work toward upgrading Israel's unique status vis-à-vis the EU and to conduct an in-depth examination of bilateral trade agreements, with a view to deepening and expanding the existing agreements to additional economic fields. Strengthening ties with the EU could help expand Israeli-European economic cooperation and attract regional investments, but also strengthen the necessary European support and guarantees to advance an Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

Israel's crisis with US Democratic Party could deepen, especially as the 2020 presidential election draws near

Yael Patir

Israel Director at J Street and an affiliated expert at the Mitvim Institute

The Israeli election took place just as the next US presidential race was getting off the ground. The election results will impact the future of Israel-US ties, which are supposed to become an issue on the campaign agenda toward the November 2020 presidential election. As Democratic candidate Beto O'Rourke said at a recent rally, "The US-Israel relationship is one of the most important relationships we have on the planet and that relationship, if it is successful, must transcend partisanship in the United States, and it must be able to transcend a prime minister who is racist." The former Texas congressional representative was expressing the Democrats' sense of betrayal at the alliance Netanyahu has forged with Republicans (starting back in the days of President Obama) and with President Trump. Democrats are also dismayed that Israel has become a divisive partisan issue in the US, similar to the deep ideological divide over abortions and gun ownership. This is a dangerous development for Israel.

If Israel's next right-wing government advances annexation of the West Bank under Trump's auspices, ties with the US and with the Democratic Party, which represents most Americans, will have a hard time bouncing back. In this scenario, pressure will grow on Democrats to present an alternative to Republican foreign policy on Israel, and US defense aid will turn into a controversial issue. Netanyahu will have to remember that he could find himself facing a Democratic President, House and Senate come January 2020. If the common values of the Israeli-US crumble, the crisis will only intensify. The future relationship between the two countries will depend on Israeli government willingness to promote a diplomatic arrangement with the Palestinians based on the two-state solution, on non-partisan cooperation of Israeli political elements with their American counterparts, and on the relationship between the Israeli government and American Jewry. At the same time, the Israeli opposition will have to strengthen ties with the opposition to the Trump administration, and to make clear that Netanyahu and his government do not represent all of Israel.