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Netanyahu's Win Gives Him Leeway on Annexation and Gaza

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Brief Analysis

Despite his controversial campaign statements, the prime minister will likely remain cautious about actually seizing West Bank territory or ordering ground incursions into Gaza.

P rime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's April 9 electoral victory paved the way for him to pass David Ben-Gurion as Israel's longest-serving leader. His Likud Party and its right-wing allies won 65 seats in the 120-member Knesset versus 55 for the center bloc, even if the Likud only squeaked past its main rival, the Blue and White Party, by a 36-35 margin. A preliminary look at his presumptive coalition's vote tallies suggests that he will face less internal pressure on the highly controversial issue of sweeping annexations in the West Bank, enabling him to prioritize relations with the United States. Other takeaways may not be to his liking, however.

COMPETENCE OVER PROBITY

N etanyahu likely hoped that the vote would provide public validation of his leadership and give him the imprimatur needed to face down his preliminary indictment for corruption. Often known to write his own campaign ads, he personalized the elections by using slogans such as "Netanyahu, a different league," emphasizing his competence and decisiveness. He seemed to believe that the public would overlook the corruption allegations if he reminded them about his ability to talk tough while keeping the country out of war.

He also counted on winning support due to Israel's economic success. According to the World Bank, the country's per capita GDP surpassed \$40,000 in 2017, higher than Japan's. In short, if the elections boiled down to a choice

between a veteran chief executive with policy experience and a novel candidate with only military experience, Netanyahu bet that the voters would choose his track record despite the charges against him.

FRIENDS IN HIGH PLACES

Shortly before election day, President Trump publicly recognized Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights, while Russian president Vladimir Putin intervened with Syria to help Israel recover the remains of a soldier lost in the Lebanon war of 1982. Although no exit polls exist to verify whether these specific moves tipped any voters in Netanyahu's favor, at minimum they served as glaring reminders of his close relationship with two of the most powerful people in the world.

Netanyahu made similar use of his friendships with leaders from Brazil, Cyprus, and Greece, as well as with Eastern European and Gulf leaders during February's Warsaw Conference. Mobilizing international support was no doubt sweet for the prime minister given that many leaders mobilized against him in his first run against Shimon Peres in 1996.

NO POLITICAL PRICE FOR GAZA POLICY

Netanyahu faced criticism for his policy of containing Hamas and allowing Qatar to facilitate \$15 million in monthly aid to the group in Gaza. Yet his opponents did not offer any serious alternatives to this policy. No party called for Israel to launch a ground incursion into Gaza to oust Hamas, understandably fearing the certainty of numerous fatalities and the uncertainty of alternative leadership (especially given the Palestinian Authority's reticence to reenter the territory on the heels of Israeli tanks). Although Israelis were generally dissatisfied with the government's response to rocket fire from Gaza in late 2018, Netanyahu bet that talk of a ground assault would be unpalatable domestically.

This bet paid off: Netanyahu scored high with Israeli voters in southern districts adjacent to Gaza. Many of the same citizens who complained about rocket fire voted for him instead of candidates who criticized his approach to the issue. The two parties most scornful of containment did not fare well; one did not even cross the 3.25 percent electoral threshold required to enter parliament.

POOR RESULTS FOR THE HARD RIGHT

In meetings with U.S. and other foreign officials, Netanyahu often bemoans the political constraints he faces to his right. Yet some of these constraints are self-imposed, such as his repeated failure to bring centrists into his previous coalition government.

In any case, the number of seats won by factions to his right dropped in this year's elections. One party that called for building a "Third Jewish Temple" fell short of the electoral threshold, as did prominent hawkish critic Naftali Bennett, the education minister whose faction held eight seats in the previous government (he is calling for a recount).

This drop may be attributable to Netanyahu's highly controversial statement in the last days of the campaign that he would be willing to consider sweeping Israeli annexations in the West Bank—a remark that may have pulled the rug out from under hard-right parties. Most Likud members share the hard right's desire to annex all settlements in the West Bank, but they have always deferred to Netanyahu on this point. Now that he has emerged from the elections even stronger, they are even less likely to push him on this issue in the near term, while hard right factions lack the seats to issue any ultimatums of their own. Moreover, Netanyahu has been careful to avoid angering President Trump on most every issue, so his next government is unlikely to come out of the gate annexing settlements and wrecking Washington's nascent peace plan.

In short, Netanyahu is not politically helpless to resist wholesale annexation proposals that would essentially turn

Israel into Bosnia. If the U.S. peace plan is revealed but falters, he may push for selective annexations near the 1967 ceasefire lines. Yet here too, he would not actually implement such measures without Washington's approval—the same reason why he has avoided formally annexing even a single inch of the West Bank during his previous terms. And if annexations do occur, they would stem from a conscious decision on his part, not from domestic forces beyond his control.

BACKLASH FROM AMERICAN JEWS?

For the first time since the 1980s, none of Israel's smaller right-wing parties garnered double-digit seat tallies. Yet two ultraorthodox parties, Shas and United Torah Judaism, combined for 15 seats. Netanyahu sees them as convenient coalition partners because they are more focused on funding their schools and social welfare projects than influencing foreign policy or the security realm. Given their electoral strength, however, will they exact a price for pushing the coalition to victory?

Indeed, tensions between religion and state are seemingly the only area where discord could prevail in an otherwise cohesive Netanyahu government. Avigdor Liberman, head of the coalition faction Yisrael Beitenu, will soon press for a law to invoke civil fines or more on the many ultraorthodox Jews who do not enlist in the military draft as required of other Israeli citizens. The ultraorthodox parties will vociferously oppose this legislation. They might also conceivably push the boundary further by seeking restrictions on the status of largely U.S.-based nonorthodox religious streams in Israel (e.g., Reform or Conservative Judaism). If so, this is bound to create friction with American Jews, who are predominantly not orthodox. Many Jews would also be rankled if he names top aide Yariv Levin as the new justice minister, since Levin has not hid his utter distaste for the independence of Israeli's judiciary.

THE PERILS OF HUBRIS

It cannot escape Netanyahu that over a million Israelis voted for the Blue and White Party, a list that did not even exist until weeks before the elections. Pundits predicted the party would garner around 25 to 30 seats, but it wound up winning 35, just one less than Likud and a clear sign of serious public antagonism toward Netanyahu. This sentiment is hardly attributable to economic or regional policy issues, since he has performed well on those fronts by most any measure. More likely, it stems from his combative response to the corruption investigation and his lack of any plan for moving even incrementally on the Palestinian issue. Therefore, if Netanyahu tries to use parliamentary maneuvers to extricate himself from indictment in the coming months, he is bound to deepen the anger of Israelis who see their country as rooted in the rule of law.

David Makovsky is the Ziegler Distinguished Fellow and director of the Project on Arab-Israel Relations at The Washington Institute, and coauthor (with Dennis Ross) of the forthcoming book Be Strong and of Good Courage: How Israel's Most Important Leaders Shaped Its Destiny (PublicAffairs/Hachette, 2019). ❖



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