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The Future of Bibi Netanyahu

[Ehud Yaari](#)

American Interest

April 11, 2019

The one-man show is set for another term with a similar approach to foreign policy, and indictments are unlikely to cut it short.

Against all odds—and every pollster—Bibi Netanyahu managed to single-handedly win the elections in Israel. These were a referendum on his suitability to keep leading the country amid piles of pending indictments and corruption charges. He has clearly achieved his goal to reconstitute a right-wing coalition that would allow him to stay Prime Minister even if the Attorney General decides, after a July hearing with his lawyers, to bring at least three cases of bribery, deceit, and breach of trust to court, where a conviction would probably sentence him to serve time in jail.

Netanyahu performed a one-man show, running all aspects of the campaign himself, employing every possible trick, including those not in the traditional book of Israeli political etiquette. He did not hesitate to bring to the contest disciples of the outlawed Kahane movement. He depicted supporters of the “Left,” e.g. anyone not in the Likud or right of it, as being beyond the pale of patriotic loyalty to the Zionist vision, constantly insisting that the two Arab parties should not be counted as potential coalition partners. Netanyahu relentlessly kept up attacks on the media and law enforcement institutions, including the judicial system and the police, and topped them off with last-minute promises—which he has always avoided—to start annexing settlement blocks in the West Bank, thus reducing whatever slim prospects still exist to reach a two-state deal with the Palestinians.

Netanyahu’s personal conduct together with his aggressive style of propaganda alienates the more educated classes of Israeli society. Many have come to view him as a reckless, divisive, and dangerous politician, who prioritizes his own personal calculations over the interests of the state. But Bibi’s slogan was that he plays in “another league,” and the majority of voters seemed to agree. For them, Bibi’s faults are less important than his policies, and they are proud of his statesmanship on the international stage. The old “base” of the Likud has expanded to new areas in both the periphery and smaller towns. Tel Aviv and the surrounding suburbia voted for Blue and White’s Benny Gantz, so Israel is now divided between the pro and anti-Bibi camps; hence the elation among his supporters, and the bitter frustration among his critics.

At this point Netanyahu can form a government with a majority of 65 out of 120 members of parliament. This margin will constrain the extent of concessions that smaller partners in the emerging coalition can extract from him. Still, he is certainly not going to press the 16-strong ultra-religious parties on sensitive issues such as Haredi enlistment in the army, LGBT rights, conversion to Judaism, or women prayers at the Western Wall. He should be expected to sanction expanded settlements—if not annexation of some settlement blocks—and also pursue the ongoing plan to curtail the authority of the Supreme Court.

Bibi’s victory owes much to the ambiguous message of his main rivals in the Blue and White list. General Benny Gantz and his allies refrained from presenting a comprehensive platform on the topics the public most cared about. They would not take a clear stand on the concept of a Palestinian State and had very little to offer in terms of economic policy. Gantz proved unable to explain whether he would change the course of Israel’s policy on Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, or Hamas. Moreover, Gantz succeeded in winning almost the same amount of seats as the Likud, but failed to win over right-wing voters. Instead, his numbers derived from the Yesh Atid party under Yair Lapid, who joined him through a deal for rotation at the Prime Minister’s Office, and by sucking up almost three quarters of the Labor Party’s 2015 vote share. Labor—once the dominant ruling party—was decimated to only 6 seats. Gantz’s hasty declaration of victory, based on shaky exit polls, turned out to be an amateur’s mistake. Now he promises to fight Netanyahu from the benches of the opposition.

In the right-wing camp, Bibi has imposed his supremacy over his future coalition partners—Moshe Kahlon, Avigdor Lieberman, and Naftali Bennett (assuming he makes it across the 3.25 percent bar to the Knesset). They have all lost votes to the Likud, which added six seats to its Knesset faction. Netanyahu is offering Lieberman and Kahlon a chance to rejoin the Likud and, when the time comes, fight for succession. Lieberman wants to end up back at the Defense Ministry, despite widespread objections to handing him this position, and Kahlon will most likely be back at the Treasury. Netanyahu may again keep the Foreign Ministry to himself. The two main problematic appointments involve the Justice and Education Ministries claimed by the two Zionist religious parties, yet Bibi is bent on doing whatever he can to keep his lieutenants there.

Once entrusted by President Reuven Rivlin to form (within 40 days) a government, Bibi now faces the challenge of looming indictments. He can respond to this challenge in one of three ways:

- The Israeli law permits a Prime Minister—but no other minister—to stay in office while being prosecuted; the Prime Minister only needs to resign if he’s convicted by the last instance of appeal. This can take a few years. Netanyahu may ask all his coalition partners to abide by this provision instead of ousting him upon indictment, as happened to a previous Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert. Netanyahu would then face the long grueling trial ahead of him while in office.
- Alternatively, Netanyahu may try to obtain commitments by his partners to turn down the Attorney General’s request to remove his immunity, thus deferring the trial until he bows out. In this scenario the Prime Minister’s office becomes a shelter.
- A third option is to attempt to pass the “French Law,” which prohibits putting a Prime Minister on trial as long as he is in office. It is difficult to see all coalition partners agreeing to support such new legislation.

At any rate, contrary to the expectations of Blue and White leaders, Netanyahu has a reasonable chance to form a stable government that will not force him to resign when indictments are filed later this year.

If so, the thrust of Netanyahu’s policy would be to pursue his undeclared doctrine of forging alliances with countries outside the Middle East while upgrading collaboration with Sunni Arab states, especially in the Gulf, in order to further isolate the Palestinians—the hope being that the Palestinian Authority will eventually soften its terms for resolving the conflict.

Netanyahu rejects the common assumption that a deal with the Palestinians is the key to constructing close relations with the Arab world and beyond the region. He seems determined to wear down Palestinian refusal to accept his vision of a demilitarized pseudo-state. His success over the past decade in pivoting to Asia—especially India and Japan but also China; his new “Jewish-Hellenic” alliance with Greece and Cyprus based on the East Med gas fields; his close cooperation with Eastern Europe and effective coordination with Russia—will remain the focus of his efforts. At the same time the strikes against Iran’s ambition to establish a war machine in Syria and western Iraq will continue, with the full backing of the U.S. government, and he will remain focused on containing—but not attacking— Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Netanyahu hopes President Trump—who applauded his victory at the polls—will defer presenting “The Deal of the Century” at least until the summer, and if it were up to him would seek to convince Trump not to put his plan on the table at all for the foreseeable future. If the plan is presented, Netanyahu’s strategy is clear: Let President Abbas reject it first.

Ehud Yaari is a Lafer International Fellow with The Washington Institute and a veteran commentator for Israeli television.