



Briefing Note on the March 2020 Elections in Israel

Overview

Following two inconclusive results on 9 April and 17 September 2019, Israel will hold an unprecedented third consecutive election on 3 March 2020, with Benny Gantz's *Kahol Lavan* (Blue and White) and Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud locked in a tight contest to lead the country, with most polls estimating between 33-35 seats for each party. Although Gantz has been leading for most of the campaigning period, the most recent polls from Channel 12 and Kan are predicting that Netanyahu is due to overtake him. In other developments, Yamina did not bow to Netanyahu's pressure to include *Otzma Yehudit* (Jewish Power) in their slate, while Meretz (running under the umbrella of the Democratic Union in the past election) has joined forces with the Labor-Gesher list in a bid for survival. Besides this, little else seems to have changed: Avigdor Liberman and his *Yisrael Beiteinu* party insist that they will not join a Netanyahu-led government, nor sit with Arab parties. The political arithmetic indicates that, once again, there will be no clear route to government for either bloc.

Palestinian Arab Citizens of Israel

The reunited and emboldened Joint List secured three additional seats from April 2019 to September 2019. Most polls in this election are expecting them to maintain this level, or expand by one or two seats maximum. There are two factors behind their galvanization:

Firstly, as was the case in the past, campaigns of incitement galvanized Palestinian Arab turnout. In the build-up to the September election, Netanyahu's government attempted to pass a law allowing electoral officers to film in polling stations under the guise of 'electoral fraud' in these communities, while in a



last-ditch Facebook post, Netanyahu posted that the Arabs “want to destroy us”. This rhetoric, however, backfired. The September election proved one thing decisively: Palestinian citizens of Israel refuse to be passive agents in the political process. The Joint List saw a twelve-point increase in voter turnout among Palestinian citizens of Israel, challenging Netanyahu’s path to government. During the final stretch of Benny Gantz’s coalition negotiations, Netanyahu made it clear this is an unwelcome development and escalated his incitement further. He held an “emergency” rally against potential involvement of Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel in a government. Eventually, Gantz succumbed to Netanyahu’s pressure: he vowed to implement the one-sided “Deal of the Century,” and, as a final nail in the coffin, announced that the Joint List “won’t be a part of my government.” The intensified delegitimization of the community, coming from both leaders and a Trump deal that is proposing the transfer of Palestinian citizens of Israel, has spurred them to turnout in greater numbers, and this election is likely to be no different.



A poster by the right-wing organization, Israel Victory Project, in Tel Aviv. It depicts the Mahmoud Abbas and Ismail Haniyeh on their knees, eerily resembling ISIS executions, and reads: “You can only make peace with vanquished enemies.”



The second expected factor is a novel phenomenon: an increase in Jewish votes for the Joint List, with some polls expecting the figure to double from the equivalent of one seat (35,000) to two seats (70,000). The Joint List's historic recommendation (with the exception of Balad) of the leader of the Blue and White Party, Benny Gantz, to be prime minister following the September 2019, proved they are willing and active participants in the political system, although the Joint List considered this a pragmatic move and not an endorsement. However, with the main opposition now imitating Netanyahu's agenda, and Meretz merging with the Labor-Gesher list to create a joint ticket, the Zionist Left has shrunk significantly. The Joint List are expected to capitalize on this collapse and have undertaken extensive efforts to present an alternative vision for the Jewish community in the face of the failing formula on the Left. This was evident in the increase of campaign events in areas such as Tel Aviv. Presently, the Joint List is the only grouping in the Knesset that is putting forward a program for the liberation of all peoples in Israel and the Palestinian territories.



A Joint List event in Tel Aviv in February.

What issues are important to the Palestinian Arab community in Israel?

The Palestinian community in Israel is driven by several local and regional issues:

- An equitable community budget
- Fair representation in public offices
- An end to the occupation
- A repeal of the Nation State Law
- Cancellation of the discriminatory Kaminitz law on housing and planning
- Recognition for unrecognized villages in the Negev
- Ramping up efforts to fight against crime in Arab communities living in Israel (92 members of the community were killed last year)
- A comprehensive strategy to tackle the 47% poverty rate among Arab citizens of Israel
- The return of the villages of Iqrit and Bireem
- A rejection of the ‘Deal of the Century,’ and the proposals of population of transfer



Posters in Umm al-Fahm, in the crosshairs for “land swaps” in Trump’s plan: “We are here to stay.”



Ending the Deadlock

To end the current impasse, two things need to happen.

Firstly, there needs to be a radical shift away from the identity voting which has plagued Israel since 1977 and accelerated since the Oslo Accords. In Israel, political allegiances are mostly tied to descent – including Ashkenazim, Mizrahim, Ethiopians and post-Soviet Russians – or religious affiliation, which is further divided into Ashkenazi and Mizrahi factions. At present, this alignment manifests with religious parties and the Palestinian Arab parties, but also with Russian-speaking voters gravitating towards Avigdor Liberman's *Yisrael Beiteinu*, and the historical alignment between Mizrahim and the right-wing parties, who capitalized on their historical grievances with the left-wing establishment's racist policies towards them. A realignment based on shared values will alter the cycle of paralysis in Israel, which looks to have no end.

Secondly, the Jewish Israeli public needs shift its attitude towards their Palestinian Arab compatriots. As long as the most rudimentary Palestinian demands are viewed as beyond the pale, and voter turnout remains consistent among this group, then almost a quarter of the Knesset are not only delegitimized, but will be missing in action. To prevent this, the Israeli Jewish public needs to look past the caricatures painted by the two potential prime ministers and seek to build a genuine Palestinian-Arab partnership based on justice, equality, and rule of law. They have shown a willingness to participate in the political sphere, and it is time for the Jewish Israeli public to meet them half-way.

Palestinian citizens of Israel, uniquely, have the physical, psychological, cultural and linguistic access to both nations, and their very existence poses a challenge to the long-failing separationist paradigm to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They hold the key not only to ending the deadlock inside Israel, but also to solving the regional question at large.