



By Crisis Group Senior Analyst Mairav Zonszein and USMEP's Daniel Levy, President of USMEP

# Israel's Winning Coalition: Culmination of a Long Rightward Shift

*Elections in Israel have brought a far-right coalition to power. In this Q&A, Crisis Group expert Mairav Zonszein and USMEP's Daniel Levy analyse the results and their likely implications for Israeli policy and foreign relations.*

## **What, in brief, is the outcome of the elections?**

After four consecutive, inconclusive elections since April 2019, Israelis went to the polls once more on 1 November. The vote saw the return of former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, despite the fact that he is on trial for corruption. Perhaps even more significant in the outcome, however, was the victory it represented for the far right, who comprise a large part of Netanyahu's winning coalition. The three parties of the Religious Zionist alliance that handed Netanyahu his win are religiously ultra-conservative, transparently Jewish ethno-nationalist and expressly anti-Arab. The incoming coalition, which also includes two ultra-Orthodox parties, Shas and United Torah Judaism, champions formal annexation of the West Bank and seeks to weaken Israel's judiciary, which it sees as an obstacle to its Greater Israel agenda; terminate Netanyahu's corruption trial; and strengthen Israel's religious Jewish character. These are aspirations that have existed in Israeli politics for quite some time and, in some cases have even been evident in some state policies. But they have never been supported by such a

strong showing of votes. It took five elections in the last three years for the Israeli far right to triumph. Now, it has become part of the political consensus and an integral part of the winning coalition.

## **What are the main takeaways?**

The Netanyahu bloc prevailed despite losing the raw vote, with 2,303,964 votes compared with 2,330,464 to its rivals (though the anti-Netanyahu bloc includes right-wing politicians). The margin does not differ much from that in the last elections, in March 2021, when Netanyahu lost, but this time his bloc profited from two main factors. First, voter turnout was unexpectedly high at 71.3 per cent (3.9 per cent more than in 2021 and the highest since 2015), especially among the right-wing base. Secondly, the votes for two parties – Balad, a Palestinian party, and left-leaning Meretz (about 3 per cent each) – were not reflected in parliamentary seats because the parties failed to cross the 3.25 per cent threshold required to win a seat. The Netanyahu bloc thus won 64 seats in the 120-seat Knesset; its rivals managed to gain only 56. Political representation shifted to the

right within each bloc, with outgoing Prime Minister Yair Lapid gaining at the expense of Labour and Meretz on the anti-Netanyahu side, and Religious Zionism growing in strength on Netanyahu's.

An additional factor is that the anti-Netanyahu bloc, when in government over the past year, never constituted a cohesive coalition, unlike its opponents. The previous government, headed by a rotation of Naftali Bennett and Lapid, collapsed in June when a member of Bennett's party quit the coalition claiming that it was not living up to its right-wing values. The internal differences became more prominent when outgoing Defence Minister Benny Gantz's party refused to bring an Arab party into government, saying it would not cooperate with "radicals on either side", conflating the Jewish far right with left-leaning Arabs. Even had the anti-Netanyahu bloc done better, achieving the bare majority of 61 seats needed to form a government, it is highly unlikely that the bloc's members could have reached sufficient consensus to do so. There was, in other words, no alternative coalition-in-waiting. Moreover, the anti-Netanyahu bloc contains about a dozen lawmakers who are closer in their political positions to Netanyahu's Likud than to their putative coalition partners (though they oppose his return to the helm due to his corruption trial). The real overall strength of the right – with all its elements, religious and secular, more and less compromising – in the new Knesset in fact stands at approximately 75 seats.

The hard right's main competitor was Yesh Atid, Lapid's nominally centrist party. It champions neoliberal economic policies and supports, rhetorically, a vision of two states, though one that has never featured in previous peace talks, whereby all of East Jerusalem is to remain occupied and annexed and thus off the table in any negotiations with the Palestinians.

*“Among Palestinian citizens, turnout remained far lower than among Israeli Jews.”*

The party is basically a one-man show, and notably lacks internal democratic procedures or elections. It won 24 seats, substantially more than its previous seventeen, thanks primarily to voters who switched over from the liberal Zionist left.

The other competitor that managed to score seats in double digits was Gantz's hawkish National Unity list to Lapid's right, which brought together former Israel Defense Forces Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot with Likud defector Gideon Sa'ar. Despite campaigning on the issue of security, it garnered fewer votes than the Religious Zionist list, with eleven seats (compared to the latter's fourteen), likely because it offered no vision and no policies, and because most of the electorate is farther to its right.

To the left of centre is a gaping political void. After efforts to create a joint electoral list faltered, the liberal-left Zionist parties were decimated. For the first time in its history, Meretz – the only Zionist party in the Knesset that is explicitly anti-occupation and has persistently brought civil and human rights concerns to Israeli politics since its founding in 1992 – will be outside the legislature, having fallen a few thousand votes short. For its part, the Labour Party – the party of Yitzhak Rabin, the prime minister who signed the 1993 Oslo accords with the Palestinians, and other heirs to the state's founders, which dominated politics during Israel's first 30 years – just crossed the threshold with a paltry four seats, underlining the sobering fact that its relevance is long since diminished. These two parties combined now have less parliamentary representation than the non-Zionist leftist Hadash/Ta'al party, one of two representing Israel's Palestinian Arab citizens, which won five seats, with the Islamist Ra'am getting another five.

Among Palestinian citizens, turnout remained far lower than among Israeli Jews, but at 54 per cent it was up almost 10 per cent from 2021. The Arab vote was split roughly in three. Some 32 per cent of this vote went to Ra'am, which had formally joined the Bennett-Lapid government. Despite having few political gains to show for that decision, it managed

to generally maintain support among its base. Hadash/Ta'al garnered almost 30 per cent, and Balad 22.5 per cent. (While the latter failed to cross the 3.25 per cent threshold among the electorate as a whole, it did far better than expected, seemingly energising new voters.) Balad opposes the idea of Israel as a Jewish state and seeks to turn it into a binational state within the pre-1967 borders. Its strong showing points to a possible future increase in street politics and mobilisation outside the Knesset.

### **What led to the far right's success?**

While Likud remains the largest party in Israel, and voters brought back Netanyahu despite his legal troubles, the story of this election is less his comeback than the normalisation of the far right. The Religious Zionism alliance of three parties – Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power), Religious Zionism and Noam – is now the third largest bloc in parliament, having garnered around 12 per cent of the electorate, over half a million votes. Without its fourteen seats, Netanyahu would not have a governing coalition. Netanyahu has often chosen to add more moderate partners to his governments to gain room for manoeuvre. Some speculate that he may try to push some of the far-right members out, replacing them with Gantz and other members of his list, at an opportune moment, but that move would be unpopular with his base and own faction. It could rebound against Likud by further strengthening the far right.

The election's big winner is Jewish Power leader Itamar Ben Gvir, a religious settler and follower of the late extremist Meir Kahane, whose Kach party was disqualified from the Knesset in 1988 for incitement to racism and then outlawed as a terror group in 1994. Ben Gvir, a resident of the Kiryat Arba settlement adjacent to the West Bank city of Hebron, was convicted in the past on multiple charges

related to incitement to racism and supporting terror. He is notorious for having threatened the late Rabin's life just a few weeks before the latter was assassinated in 1995, and for hanging a photograph in his home of Baruch Goldstein, who massacred 29 Palestinian worshippers in Hebron in 1994.

Over the last year, Ben Gvir has commanded the Israeli media's attention, repeatedly showing up in areas of friction like the East Jerusalem neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah, mixed Arab-Jewish cities in Israel and at Jerusalem's Holy Esplanade (the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif compound), at times waving a personal firearm and calling on security forces to shoot at any Palestinian who throws a stone. His campaign slogan, "It's time to be landlords of our country", is a not-so-subtle threat to the status and rights of Palestinians, both citizens of Israel and those in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem. His party's platform speaks of developing a "detailed plan that will ensure a Jewish majority and a loyal civilian population", which includes "emigration, transfer of the enemy, an exchange of populations and any other way that will help the enemy leave our country".

Rather than a break from the past, the election results are the culmination of a steady increase in religiosity and a growing rightward shift in Israeli society over the last two decades. The principal driver of this trend is a longstanding ethno-nationalist, expansionist project – one that elements of the Zionist centre and left have either been a part of or failed to challenge. This project has lately attracted young Israelis from religious and/or low socio-economic backgrounds, many of whom have witnessed Palestinian violence, and identify with Jewish pride, especially after years of indoctrination by religious parties that controlled the education ministry. The election results are thus first and

*“The election results are the culmination of a steady increase in religiosity and a growing rightward shift in Israeli society over the last two decades.”*

foremost a product of successive Israeli governments pursuing the settlement enterprise, continued military rule and systematic deprivation of the rights of Palestinians in the occupied territories, as well as the disenfranchisement of Israel's Palestinian citizens. That Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have designated Israel's control as legally constituting apartheid speaks to the rightward drift.

The far right's success is also due in part to the splintering and reshaping of the right since the start of Netanyahu's corruption trial, which led politicians on the right to defect to his rivals' camp, compelling Netanyahu during his year in opposition to seek out far-right support for his political survival, something he had succeeded in avoiding until the March 2021 election.

The riots in Israeli cities in May 2021, which saw violent clashes between Jewish and Palestinian citizens, is an additional factor in the far right's rise. These events caught many Jewish citizens off guard and left them feeling vulnerable. Even before the 2021 events, polls had consistently shown that nearly half of Israelis think Jews and Arabs should live separately, but afterward the proportion grew to 60 per cent. In addition, Israelis have been affected by the rise in attempted and successful Palestinian attacks on Israelis – themselves prompted by the daily violence perpetrated by the military occupation – which have become an almost daily occurrence in the West Bank. Ben Gvir campaigned on restoring Israelis' personal security by lifting any remaining restraints from Israeli soldiers, police officers and civilians in confronting Palestinians.

The success of the ultra-Orthodox parties, Shas and United Torah Judaism, which represents religious Jews, who are generally from low socio-economic backgrounds, is due largely to demographics. Ultra-Orthodox (or Haredi) Israelis tend to have more children, and thus bigger families, who often vote together as a bloc based on their identity. Since the Bennett-Lapid government excluded the religious parties and included secular elements from the centre-left that sought, for example, to provide public transport on the Sabbath, the religious

parties campaigned hard to get back into the coalition, and they succeeded in raising voter turnout in their districts. Three of the four parties that comprise the new coalition are Israel's sole explicitly religious parties. Religious Jews in Israel are now almost exclusively represented by the political right. The Haredi parties are notably focused more on issues of religion and state, and ensuring subsidies for their constituency, than the Palestinian issue. On Palestinian issues, by way of comparison to the Religious Zionism Party, they vary between endorsement, indifference and sometimes disagreement (for example over change versus continuity in the status quo at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, which could feature in the new coalition).

### **What is the next government likely to do?**

The victorious hard-right coalition is dedicated not only to ensuring Israel's continued subjugation of Palestinians but also to fulfilling its vision of a populist, conservative society. Its orientation is manifested most clearly in its desire to overhaul the judiciary, change the balance between religion and state, further limit minority rights and backpedal on other issues that have been a hallmark of the liberal democratic policies practised inside Israel (though not for the Palestinians under occupation).

One of the far right's most significant campaign promises was to weaken the judicial system by constraining the powers of the Supreme Court and the attorney general, and changing the criminal code, which would also have the effect of annulling Netanyahu's corruption charges. These proposals came from Bezalel Smotrich, who heads the Religious Zionism party, which merged with Ben Gvir's Jewish Power for the election. While the legislative road to these objectives is winding, the new coalition will put the integrity of Israel's judicial system – and the public's willingness to condone such blatant attempts at undermining the rule of law – to the test.

The Israeli right has for years been waging a battle against the Supreme Court, which it sees as a major obstacle to continued expropriation and dispossession of Palestinians, further de

facto and possible de jure annexation, and elements of an exclusionary project inside Israel. The court has hardly blocked settlement expansion and Israeli violations of international law, or worked to preserve liberal democracy, but the right has nonetheless rallied its constituents against what it sees as judicial activism. It can now translate its quest into efforts to gain full government control over appointment of the court's justices. It can also pass legislation granting the Knesset the ability to override Supreme Court rulings striking down laws, for example regarding exemption from military

result of Ben Gvir's targeting of them as internal enemies. Both he and Netanyahu referred throughout the campaign to Palestinian Arab politicians as "terrorists" or "supporters of terror". Ben Gvir has threatened to deport Arab citizens he deems disloyal. He has also encouraged the creation of Jewish vigilante militias in cities across Israel to protect Jewish citizens from what he claims are threats from Palestinians, both citizens and labourers entering from the West Bank. His entry into government and likely the security cabinet could have a greater and more immediate impact on Palestinians

*“Tensions at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, which has been a major flashpoint for clashes between Palestinians and Israeli forces, are likely to intensify.”*

service for ultra-Orthodox Jews, with a supermajority (with some even pushing for a simple majority). This legislation, termed the override clause, has become a focus of attention in the days following the announcement of the election results.

The religious parties will likely also push back on some of the outgoing government's economic reforms. Chief among these were the effort to integrate the ultra-Orthodox population into the work force by compelling their educational institutions to include core subjects like math and sciences in the curriculum; and to repeal the tax on single-use plastics, which large religious families, in particular, consume in high quantities. The expressly anti-LGBTQ politics of the Religious Zionism party could mean reversal of recent measures institutionalising gay and transgender rights.

Maybe the most dangerous effects of the new government will be felt on the streets where Palestinians and Israelis come into contact most closely – in Jerusalem (which is 40 per cent Palestinian) and in mixed Arab-Jewish cities like Lod/Al-Lid, Jaffa and Haifa, which saw outbursts of violence in May 2021. The already fragile dynamic between Jewish and Palestinian citizens, and the latter's vulnerable position, could easily deteriorate further as a

inside Israel than in the occupied territories.

Tensions at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, which has been a major flashpoint for clashes between Palestinians and Israeli forces, are likely to intensify, as ultra-nationalist Jews will be emboldened to further undermine the delicate status quo there and do so with explicit government support – a change from the gradual deterioration to date. The status quo since 1967 places the site's administration in the hands of the Waqf, an Islamic body affiliated with Jordan, while Israel polices it from the outside. Jews can gain entry to the site but are not permitted to worship there. Ben Gvir has advocated for Jews' right to pray at the Temple Mount, and his future role in government could give him significant authority to oversee Israeli policies there.

### **What does the election mean for Israel's conflict with the Palestinians?**

The election result offers little to no prospect for a return to negotiations with the Palestinians, something the Bennett-Lapid government also rejected. In that respect, the "peace process" to which outside powers pay lip service has entered a new level of disconnection from reality, to the extent of becoming little but a rhetorical device. In matters pertaining to the

Palestinians, settlements and the occupied territories, the outgoing government hardly strayed from Netanyahu's policies and, arguably, was worse in some ways. It further entrenched Israel's occupation while boasting better cooperation with the Palestinian Authority (PA), and in some cases took new, far-reaching measures against Palestinians, notably unprecedentedly criminalising six Palestinian NGOs and promoting new regulations by the Israeli Ministry of Defense's Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories to further restrict access to and residency in the West Bank for visitors and family members. Israel has also escalated military raids, primarily in the northern West Bank, in a cycle that has included a spike in Palestinian attacks and turned 2022 into the deadliest year for Palestinians since 2015.

Not only will the yet-to-be-formed government almost certainly step up Israel's policy of de facto annexation of the occupied territories, it may go beyond that. In the past, Netanyahu worked to break the West Bank into enclaves. The far right takes a leap further, seeking to formally annex the entire territory, including through measures that would further anchor Israel's control in law (it can take such action even without formally declaring annexation), without granting the population citizenship. Settlers, who already act with impunity in building new outposts and attacking the local population (as well as Palestinian, international and Israeli human rights activists), will only be further emboldened. Ben Gvir has campaigned on loosening the military's open-fire regulations, and Smotrich, who co-founded the pro-settler watchdog group Regavim (which pushes Israel to take legal action against Palestinian construction in the West Bank), is committed to enhanced dispossession of Palestinians from Area C, the 60 per cent of the West Bank still under full Israeli control.

Further displacement of Palestinians in Area C is a distinct possibility, as is reconstruction of four settlements in the northern West Bank evacuated by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in 2005 amid Israel's unilateral disengagement

from Gaza. A more vigorous re-examination of relations with the PA is likely to be on the agenda at some stage (especially if the PA's leadership succession is up for grabs, as it could very well be, as President Mahmoud Abbas is 87); elements on the right have called for the PA's complete dismantling, something the military and intelligence agencies deem to be a threat to stability in the West Bank and to Israeli security. With tensions already running high, Israeli incursions and assassinations increasing in recent weeks, and Palestinian frustration and support for armed resistance growing, the prospect of a major escalation should be taken seriously. The conditions of Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails and possible use of the death penalty are other potential flashpoints.

#### **What are the implications for Israel's relations with the U.S. and for its regional policies?**

Few outside powers – whether Washington, key European Union capitals or Israel's neighbours – will welcome the election result.

The U.S. State Department has already implied that it will refuse to work with Ben Gvir, though it is unclear what that means in practice. Beyond that, the U.S. is unlikely to take many, or any, concrete steps to try and shape the new government's policies. Just as President Joe Biden has continued to condemn Israeli settlement expansion but done nothing to stop it, the U.S. reaction to the far-right coalition's victory probably will not go beyond the rhetorical. Israel and its defenders have consistently and, so far, successfully argued that U.S. pressure would be counterproductive. Yet this latest election result offers further proof to the contrary: Israeli voters assume that Israel will pay no price for its repressive policies and the prospect of Washington's displeasure with election results hardly affects their thinking at the ballot box. How much a different U.S. approach would influence Israeli politics is difficult to assess, but it would be hard to refute that long-standing U.S.-guaranteed impunity has been a factor in the country's rightward drift. The far

right's arrival in power in Israel could, however, give new energy to progressive U.S. Jews and Democrats, who have been pushing for greater oversight of U.S. aid to Israel and criticising the deferential treatment Israeli governments receive from the White House.

European governments may be unsettled by the arrival of the far right in power, but they are preoccupied with the war in Ukraine and its repercussions, and hence unlikely to do more than raise their voices on occasion. European Union member states are too divided on where they stand on the conflict for the institution to significantly modify its relations with the Israeli government.

In the Middle East, the presence of rabidly anti-Arab politicians could make it harder for Arab countries to justify continuing to build their relations with Israel, especially if Israeli policies increase the salience of Jerusalem and its holy sites as a flashpoint. Yet, while Israel's new friends may occasionally protest Israeli policies toward Palestinians, they are unlikely to jeopardise the partnerships they so proudly announced when signing the Abraham Accords under Netanyahu's leadership in 2020. In the more immediate neighbourhood, Netanyahu has threatened to annul the recently signed Lebanon-Israel maritime border demarcation accord. Whether he will act on his threat, given the economic benefit from additional gas

production and the diplomatic win in striking a deal with an enemy Arab state, is a different matter; he could just blame his predecessor but leave the deal in place. Across the Jordan river, Amman may be wary of what the new coalition will mean for the Jordanian kingdom's stability, and Jordanian officials have already warned Israel that any change to the status of the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif would seriously damage relations.

Finally, as regards the Ukraine war, Netanyahu will likely hew to the outgoing government's refusal to provide military aid to Kyiv. Netanyahu and Russian President Vladimir Putin developed close ties over years of both being in power; that relationship will resume under circumstances that differ markedly from those when Netanyahu lost power almost eighteen months ago. The prime minister-to-be, a seasoned geopolitical player, managed to maintain Israel's exceptional relationship with the U.S. while forging stronger links with Russia and also China. This balancing act may prove more challenging amid the global zero-sum dynamics following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

*The views represented in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the members of the USMEP's International Board and Senior Advisors.*