



NATO DEFENSE COLLEGE FOUNDATION

STRATEGIC TRENDS

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LEVANT

Israeli elections

On March 17 Israeli voters gave incumbent right-wing prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu a stunning re-election victory, in light of a campaign rhetoric, which included quashing any hopes of a Palestinian state and warning his supporters about “droves of Arab voters” being bussed in by left-wing. His provocations were certainly effective, however, the complexity of Israel’s electoral system invites to a deeper analysis of this victory.

Netanyahu earned 30 seats in Israel’s Knesset (or parliament), the largest part allocated to any party, however those seats represent the wishes of about 23% of the Israeli voting public, or less than a quarter of the country. Indeed, Netanyahu did not win a majority (no Israeli prime minister ever has) which is at 61 seats and now has to build up a coalition government. Some believe that the centrist Kulanu party, led by former minister of Communications Moshe Kahlon could be the kingmaker in such coalition. Moreover, while left-wing parties – mostly represented by Yitzhak Herzog’s Zionist Union – did not win the premiership, their impact in parliament has grown compared to the last round of elections. And in a nation where governance can be as fraught and fractured as Israel, a strong opposition counts a lot.

Very noteworthy is the third place gained by a new party called the Joint List, an alliance of Israel's four Arab-dominated parties – Hadash, Balad, United Arab List and Ta'al, a coalition hoping to represent the 20% of Israel's citizens who are Arabs, with full voting rights, and were never able to influence elections.

However, the unprecedented fourth-term election of Benjamin Netanyahu is indeed a significant event in itself. Considering his late actions and policy positions, it will undoubtedly be significant in global terms. First off, Netanyahu's actions and declarations put the historical US-Israeli relation under strain. For example, during the campaign Netanyahu spoke to the US Congress, invited by the Republican speaker of the House of Representatives, who – in a unique situation – did not recognize the White House's role. With his speech Netanyahu actively tried to derail the Iran negotiations and strengthen the Republican campaign for additional sanctions against Iran. The Obama administration responded by publicly questioning its ally's trustworthiness and sending senior US officials to caucus with Israeli opposition leaders.

Nevertheless, President Obama is going to have to deal with the fact that Netanyahu's victory is going to embolden him on the Iranian dossier and encourage sabotage tactics. However, given the current status of the bilateral relations it seems plausible that the US will try to power through the negotiations without paying much attention to the protest emanating from the Israeli right.

Something that cannot be done in the context of relations with the Palestinians and the Middle East peace process. In the build-up to the election, Netanyahu argued there would never be a Palestinian state, at least not during his tenure. Even though this rhetoric is definitely instrumental for the re-election, it is tough to imagine how Netanyahu's Israel could be considered a credible partner in peace negotiations again.