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CAN ISRAEL SURVIVE NETANYAHU?

Following Benjamin Netanyahu's reelection Israel is a land of contradictions, democratic and wealthy yet with dangerous demographic divisions

By Dan Perry

One of the oddest aspects of Israel's political landscape is the fact that the country's security establishment resides firmly on what passes for the dovish side of the political spectrum. From the Shin Bet security service to the Mossad intelligence agency to the military, those in charge of Israel's wars become men of peace, relatively speaking, upon shedding their uniforms. So cognoscenti were not surprised when a gaggle of generals finally made a stand and banded together to take on the long-serving nationalist prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu.

That doomsday weapon of the left was used in the April 9 election—and wasted. Netanyahu's Likud and parties supporting him won sixty-five of the 120 seats in the Knesset.

Netanyahu not only survived the onslaught by a trio of recent military chiefs (which in the last week became, absurdly, a quartet), but he did so from the awkward and unprecedented position of running with three announced criminal indictments hanging over his head. He now claims a personal mandate, and for the almost half of the country that despises him, the situation is excruciating. To the millions that blindly support him, none of it seems to matter; it is a situation that mirrors what is evident in other democracies with a simmering internal clash of cultures.

These charges of bribery and breach of trust—in scandals worth millions—were announced in the middle of the campaign by the attorney general, a man widely considered to be a Netanyahu crony and accused by some of delaying and defanging the even worse charges that could have been leveled. Expect Netanyahu to try to organize various forms of immunity from prosecution, in exchange for favors for his coalition partners, some of whom will have the power to bring down his government. Many

◀ A laborer hangs up a Likud election campaign banner depicting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Jerusalem, March 28, 2019. *Reuters/Ammar Awad*

are even more nationalist than he is, boding ill for any peace efforts with the Palestinians.

Also at stake are relations between the religious and secular in Israel, which will become even more tense, as well as Netanyahu's gradual undermining of democracy and the rule of law. That latter aspect may be the most interesting: few outside the country appreciate just how remarkable its democracy is, or has been, as Netanyahu takes the country ever closer to something resembling Erdoğan's Turkey.

Enemies of Israel might rejoice at this victory by supposed Zionist nationalists, which is but one of the ironies at play. How did it happen?

For one thing, the economy is doing fine. Israel's per capita annual Gross Domestic Product or GDP of about \$40,000 is right around that of France and Britain, unemployment and inflation are close to zero, and Israel is a veritable world leader in technology. In addition, deaths from terrorism are way down, which is critical for a populace still traumatized by memories of the Second Intifada of 2000–04. Israel faces grave and genuinely existential threats as a direct result of Netanyahu's policies, but these are long-term and complicated, requiring an understanding of history to grasp.

The generals, men used to giving orders rather than persuading, were not well suited to delivering complex, impassioned messages. Instead they ran an anemic and gentlemanly campaign. Netanyahu met that with customary ruthlessness (salacious rumors, leaks of phone hacks, and charges of mental instability on the part of his main rival, retired Gen. Benny Gantz). And the prime minister's

base again proved itself to be unburdened with expectations of politesse or probity in the public domain. Netanyahu's victory was smaller by one seat than that of 2015, but still comfortable by Israeli standards.

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In the end he managed to cast his martial challengers as weak-willed and soft-hearted, received a series of extraordinary favors from his ally Donald Trump, dominated the discourse of the campaign, and fired up his base with nationalist rhetoric and abuse

of Israel's Arab citizens. In one TV appearance he thundered that Israel is the nation-state of the Jews, "and the Jews alone." Days before the vote, he pledged to annex parts of the West Bank, which could well start a war. On election day, he dispatched activists with video cameras to polls in Arab areas in a bid to discourage them from voting. The venomous cocktail worked.

Aftermath of a Historic Election

Under normal circumstances in Israel, there would now be two scenarios. The first, and most likely, is a nationalist government of Likud and its natural allies. Such a government would probably further Jewish settlement in the West Bank, court conflict with the Palestinians including possibly through annexations, continue the encroachment of religion upon the lives of Israel's secular (but docile) majority, undermine Israel's democratic institutions (first and foremost the legal system now hounding Netanyahu) and engineer (as if for fun) constant frictions with the many citizens who oppose the right fiercely.

The second would be a unity government of Likud and Blue and White, the opposition party led by Gantz. In the party seat tally the two groups tied at thirty-five seats—meaning they would need no other allies to form what might optimistically be viewed as a somewhat centrist coalition.

Indeed, it would be conceivable for that type of coalition to back peace moves with the Palestinians, because Blue and White would support them by definition and Netanyahu is so strong in Likud that if he chose to break toward backing peace he could probably get it past his Lilliputian legislators, whose primary motivation, in most cases, is scarcely grander than maintaining a share of power. Such a coalition would also be free of the religious parties. That means Netanyahu could then delight most of his secular detractors by avoiding more religious coercion and even taking active steps like ending draft exemptions for the legions of seminary students; allowing public transport on the Sabbath, civil marriages, easier conversions for only partly-Jewish immigrants from the Soviet Union; and repairing relations with the majority of American Jews who are Reform or Conservative (as opposed to Orthodox, the more conservative strain that dominates in Israel). Indeed, one of Netanyahu's would-be allies, former defense minister Avigdor Lieberman, is himself at odds with the religious parties and is believed to be pushing in this direction.

In theory, such a Blue and White and Likud unity government makes sense given the repeated promises by the Trump administration to propose a peace plan in the aftermath of the election—the much-hyped “deal of the century” between Israel and the Palestinians.

But there is a big obstacle undermining this scenario: Gantz and his allies have been so vigorous in ruling out a joint government while on the campaign trail (because of the indictments) that a comedown would be politically devastating, especially for new politicians whose main calling cards are straight talk and dependability.

So, it is more likely that Israelis and Palestinians are condemned to another nationalist government in Jerusalem that would be a continuation of the current

one but perhaps even more radical—because the smaller nationalist parties have become more nationalist.

Netanyahu appears ready to give these allies almost anything to stay in power, in return expecting their support even as his legal troubles mount. (There is talk, not convincingly denied by Netanyahu, of a coming effort to pass legislation disallowing prosecution of the sitting prime minister.)

One of these parties now includes followers of the late extremist Rabbi Meir Kahane, who advocated expulsion of the Arabs from the Land of Israel. Moreover, the two ultra-Orthodox parties have grown from thirteen seats to sixteen and appear poised to continue pressing their conflict with the modern part of Israel—trying to ban public transport and commerce on the Sabbath, imposing various segregations between the sexes, avoiding math and science in their schools, and prolonging the blanket exemptions on the military draft for their youth. These are all things that outrage secular Israelis to such a degree that even violence is not hard to imagine.

In a reflection of this move to the right, Netanyahu promised in the last days of his campaign to formally annex parts of the West Bank—a move that was outside the limits of polite conversation in Israel until now, and is also a reflection of how far Netanyahu feels he can go with a United States president as supportive as Trump.

The coming months could bring any number of dramas. Within a year at most—unless he extorts an immunity law from his coalition—Netanyahu is expected to be indicted on charges that no leader would normally be able to fight while in office. Yet these are not normal times.

That leaves the Trump peace plan as the wildcard. Could it actually emerge as a creative gambit that would reshuffle the cards and bring surprises in its wake? If it is, all bets are off, and Gantz might even join the coalition at a later date, claiming historical circumstances require past positions to be put aside. But Trump and Netanyahu are so aligned that it is hard to see the U.S. president genuinely troubling his ally with proposals anywhere near comprehensive enough to tempt the Palestinians. It may not even matter: after decades of failed efforts many have concluded anyway that barring a paradigm shift—an Armageddon-like war?—a deal is simply not possible, and they may be right. So the plan, if and when it comes, could well be dead on arrival—a charade aiming merely to fulfill another Trump pledge. It would, in this scenario, be engineered such that even a nationalist Israeli government might pretend to accept it and stay intact, banking on the Palestinians to do its dirty work by categorically rejecting it themselves. One safe way to achieve that is to not include the outcome of an independent Palestinian state as a guiding principle.

So in this scenario the occupation continues unabated.

Israelis calculate that they will not be punished for this by the wider region, where the stars are strangely aligning for Netanyahu. The conflict between the Sunni world and Iran has made it possible for him to make some quiet inroads in the Gulf as well as nurture relations with Egypt and Jordan. It is a confluence of circumstances that have even enabled him to somehow cast himself as a statesman.

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Since it is the Middle East, of course, other dangers abound—from Hezbollah in Lebanon, with its thousands of rockets pointed at the heart of Israel, to the ongoing (if winding down) war in Syria, to proxy shenanigans of every kind involving Iran, to an actual conflict should Iran resume (or be seen to resume) nuclear activities.

The Trump Factor

It is hard to overestimate the impact Trump has had on Netanyahu's reelection, and astounding to consider the various ways in which Trump has trampled on norms and precedent to help his ally.

Just over a year ago, Trump announced that he was recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital, making the United States the first major government in the world to do so. Trump did not specify whether this applied to occupied/annexed East Jerusalem or just the west. It is important to recall that the 1947 United Nations partition plan envisioned all of the city as a separate zone from the Arab and Jewish states it called for, and almost all countries have ever since had their embassies in Tel Aviv. This put Israelis in the unique position of having other countries try to determine their capital, which even for moderates was a source of annoyance. Consequently, support in Israel for Trump's move was almost unanimous: even liberals backed it, although with misgivings on account of its helping their nemesis Netanyahu.

In the middle of the election campaign Trump signed a declaration recognizing Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights, which were seized from Syria in the 1967 war and annexed in 1981. This, too, unites Jewish Israelis, who consider Syria's case for a return of the area to be weak. As many Israelis see it, the borders between Israel/Palestine and its neighbors were drawn by colonial powers a century ago almost at random. As an independent state Syria controlled the area briefly—for some two decades only—during which, in Israelis's view, it abused that control, using the topographical advantage to

launch attacks on Israeli villages below. Unlike the West Bank, the heights do not have a large non-Jewish population, so there is no “demographic issue,” and the local Druze have the right to Israeli citizenship. The Golan and also the border with Syria have been peaceful for decades, and Syria now is not stable. Lastly, Israelis adore the Golan’s green expanses and the ski resort they built there. No American president would have embraced these arguments and risked fallout by recognizing Israel’s claim to the Golan Heights, but Trump did. And Netanyahu reaped the benefits.

Lastly, and perhaps most incredibly, Trump sent over videos in which he explicitly endorsed Netanyahu, calling him a great statesman. This enabled Netanyahu—a man who is positively loathed by most leaders in the democratic world—to claim he is a diplomat without equal. Many voters bought it.

After such generous assistance, some might think Trump would hand Netanyahu a bill in the form of a real peace plan, including a Palestinian state and other elements to make it palatable to Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas, which Netanyahu would be beholden to support. If this happens, Netanyahu’s upcoming right-wing coalition would implode and he could not survive without a unity government. It is hard to envision a move so inconvenient to Netanyahu coming from this White House—unless, of course, it was somehow coordinated from the start. Some things may not be visible right now.

How Israel is Committing Demographic Suicide

To many people around the world, the idea of Israel handing over the West Bank (and Gaza) to the Palestinians is something of a historical imperative and

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a question of justice. Israelis do not see it that way for a variety of reasons. Most Jewish Israelis want justice but also want to mitigate risks. Most Jewish Israelis want peace but they distrust the Palestinians to offer it on any reasonable terms. Most Jewish Israelis note that without any of the West Bank, Israel at its narrowest is ten miles (sixteen kilometers) wide, and they reason that any territory they evacuate might eventually come under the rule of rocket-launching Islamists.

The reason the moderate side of Israel gets as much support as it does (just under 50 percent in recent elections including Arab voters) mostly derives from something completely different, a desire to reduce the “demographic problem” that keeping the Occupied Territories entails: Israel plus the West Bank (plus Gaza) is only 50 percent Jewish, and even non-nationalists in Israel still want a Jewish majority. Some will call this racism, but you could also argue that it is the

natural desire of all nation-states from Thailand to Romania.

Many and perhaps most right-wing voters in Israel do not quite grasp this fact, but between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River there is parity between Jews and Arabs—not exactly a Jewish state. This is the main reason Israel has refrained from formally annexing any of the area (except for East Jerusalem).

No fewer than four different types of jurisdiction have evolved for the Arabs. Israel proper is a democracy where there are 6.5 million Jews and 2 million Arabs, all citizens with the right to vote but also second-class in a variety of ways as Arab Israelis have lower incomes, poorer schools and municipalities, and are not eligible for some civilian jobs which require the holder to have served in the Israeli Armed Forces, which as Arabs, they are blocked from joining.

Things start to change when we look at the Arabs living in East Jerusalem. The Old City and the Arab neighborhoods to the east of it were controlled by Jordan from 1948 until the 1967 war. Israel annexed the area, united it with adjacent West Jerusalem, and tacked on bits of the surrounding West Bank as well, calling it a united city that will forever be Israel's capital. The Palestinians there—at 200,000 they are now slightly outnumbered by Jews who have moved into the sector—can travel anywhere in Israel, have Israeli IDs and can apply for citizenship (few actually do, and even fewer are approved, through a variety of machinations).

The position of Palestinians in the West Bank is far worse. There are about 2.5 million Palestinians there and almost a half million Jewish settlers (but most of these are close to the old border, which might still enable some sort of ethnic partition). The entire area is in effect under military administration, although most of the Palestinians live in areas administered by the Palestinian Authority (PA), an autonomy government set up in the 1990s (despite the vigorous opposition of Likud). The PA gives Palestinians some degree of self-rule and gives Israel's occupation a plausible deniability. But Palestinians travelling from town to town must cross areas under full Israeli control. Israel's army can enter the autonomous areas at will and Israel controls entry and exit from the overall territory. Jewish settlers and the Palestinians live under distinct legal regimes with no equality of rights. This situation in the West Bank does not look sustainable and it does not look good.

Finally, the Gaza enclave is a strip of land by the sea which was meant to be part of the PA but was taken over by Hamas militants in 2007 after Israel totally pulled out all of its soldiers and several thousand settlers. Gaza's two million Palestinians, many of them descendants of refugees from elsewhere in Palestine, live under severe Islamist rule. Hamas, the ruling party in Gaza, has sworn to destroy Israel and occasionally provokes the Israeli military with rocket fire,

which several times has resulted in mini-wars in which Israel pummels Gaza, killing civilians and militants both, until the rockets stop for a while. Israel also blockades Gaza from the sea, land, and air, because of a reasonable concern that Hamas would bring in armaments and attack. Egypt, to the south, completes the blockade and the isolation of Gaza. Gazans say this blockade means Israel is still an occupying force. While this claim is not accurate, there is no denying that the situation is an international disgrace.

It is possible that this four-part Palestinian tinderbox—Arabs in Israel, Palestinians in Jerusalem, Palestinians in the West Bank, and Palestinians in Gaza—will explode at any moment in the form of another intifada in the West Bank, another war with Hamas-led Gaza, or greater tensions inside Israel.

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The standard global narrative on this says the worst thing is for Israel to annex the West Bank. The truth is that a complete annexation may well end up as something the *Palestinians* demand, along with the

citizenship and voting rights in Israel that such a move would entail. Indeed, one of the grand ironies of the situation is that this sort of national suicide for the Jewish state is precisely where its nationalists appear to be unwittingly headed. World powers would probably support the creation of such a unified Israel/Palestine, which would allow for Israeli Jews to be eventually replaced as the majority people of a binational country.

If Barbara Tuchman were still alive and writing updates to her book “The March of Folly,” Netanyahu would be providing sterling material for a chapter offering proof positive that leaders sometimes act, in bewildering fashion, against their nations’ interests.

Israel’s Other Demographic Problem

Israelis are also coming to terms with an internal demographic problem: Jewish Israel is badly divided and the divisions, which were always difficult, are becoming toxic because of the way they map onto political differences among the Jews. The part of Israel that is modern—the source of Start-up Nation’s miraculous successes, the academic achievements, the very high GDP per capita, the gay parades, the beach and bar culture—is also overwhelmingly on the left, and also dominated by Jews who are Ashkenazic, or European-descended (despite intermarriage between the groups this background can still often be discerned). They are also the ones who pay most of the taxes and who serve without quibbles in the military.

Arrayed against them is right-wing Israel, which ranges from being conservative culturally to overwhelmingly religious. There are many complexities but it can be said that this part of the country is more Sephardic (Middle Eastern-descended), poorer, less educated, less liberal, and at times not at all concerned with the maintenance of liberal democracy. This side also grows faster; it is not unheard-of for ultra-Orthodox Jews to have ten children or more. That means that right-wing Israel's proportion of the population—yielding almost automatic majorities for the “right-wing bloc” of parties—is growing all the time.

Members of the left side see the divide in Israel in this way: they are being asked to create the economy, cover the bills, police the occupations, and fight the wars imposed on them by the right, while in the bargain being occasionally denigrated as traitors and naifs by demagogues like Netanyahu. The antipathy is becoming hatred.

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It is likely that the center-left's only chance of future success is an open alliance with Arab Israelis who are 20 percent of the population and also growing at a faster rate than most groups among the Jews. They are close to automatic backers of the center-left, but remain at arm's length—their parties have never been formally part of a dovish coalition, only supporters from the outside. The center-left keeps things this way in the (not unreasonable but still inelegant) hope of drawing some support from bigots on the right.

Only half of the Arabs voted in this election compared to more than 70 percent of the Jews. Part of the reason is anger with their unofficial allies on the center-left for not embracing them enough. Another element is anger at Netanyahu for his nationalist statements and acts (like passing last year's nation-state law implicitly diminishing their status and that of Arabic as one of the three national languages of Israel)—which is ironic, since in not voting they did Netanyahu a huge favor. Had their participation on April 9 reached the level of the Jews' the election would have been tied, or even won by the center-left.

A Legal Tempest, and a Record

A decade ago, Netanyahu as opposition leader hounded Ehud Olmert from office arguing that a prime minister cannot function under police investigation, and Olmert dutifully resigned, finding himself in jail for a spell a few years later. Today Netanyahu, in a case of rarified hypocrisy, is several significant steps further down the legal road than Olmert had been. A host of police investigations have been *concluded* with the attorney general announcing a trio

of charges against Netanyahu, including bribery and breach of trust (pending a hearing to take place in coming months).

A rogue's gallery of cronies has turned state's witness against the prime minister and there are more investigations apparently coming, including shady submarine deals approved by Netanyahu which enriched relatives and caused legal troubles for aides. This follows a stream of tragicomic expense scandals and abuse accusations lodged against his wife by domestic staff, as well as embarrassments such as leaked evidence of his son attending strip joints and joyriding at the public's expense.

The expectation had been for Netanyahu to not come this far, and some still expect him to be forced to resign once the charges are formally pressed after the hearing. Anything else would be a total violation of norms (a little like a U.S. president not releasing tax returns). But this is an era where norms have been thrown out the window; much may depend on public opinion polls done after the charges are formal. By the letter of the law, Netanyahu can hang on through not only a conviction but the whole appeals process all the way to the supreme court, which would take years.

The Israel Netanyahu leads is, in theory, prosperous and strong. However, the societal schisms exacerbated by his divisive, corrupt, and bitterly contested rule, and the untenable situation in the West Bank, combine to threaten the country's very existence. In July, Netanyahu will break founding father David Ben-Gurion's longevity record to become Israel's longest-serving prime minister, at over thirteen years. He may also turn out to be one of its last. ®

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