Will Netanyahu's Return Lead to Increased Israeli Isolation?

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Summary

Israel faces a challenging future after the elections. It can no longer blindly trust the United States. With Obama set for his second term, Netanyahu could face difficulties on his stand towards Palestine and Iran. With respect to Egypt and President Morsi, Israel would need to tread carefully, especially due to the Muslim Brotherhood's ideological affiliation with the Palestine cause. Reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah could throw up new challenges. Elsewhere too in the region, Israel and Netanyahu would face hostility and isolation if the present trend of Israeli policies towards the region continues or even strengthens. Netanyahu and his right wing coalition would have to think hard on how to move ahead after the elections. The traditional right wing ideology, which rejects Palestinian statehood, talks of Palestinian terrorism, advocates annexation of most of the West Bank and openly advocates military strikes on Iran, is likely to run counter to global sentiment and cost Israel crucial support from allies.

All indications and polls in the lead up to elections for Israel's Knesset scheduled for 22 January point to the return to power of the right wing coalition led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. This time, perhaps, his Likud Party may even increase its tally in the Knesset to between 36 and 38, a significant increase from the 27 gained in the 2009 elections.[1] The question that however looms larger than the immediate result of the elections is how Israel would move ahead in terms of its domestic and foreign policies. Going by Netanyahu's present term, the return of a stronger Right Wing coalition may lead to increased friction in the region and increased Israeli isolation as well.

Netanyahu's Present Term

Although the Kadima Party won 28 seats in the February 2009 elections, Israel's president called upon the Likud which had only 27 seats to form the government because of the assessment that the latter would be able to muster up the required majority. Netanyahu's term commenced against the backdrop of Israel's offensive into Gaza in December 2008, Operation Cast Lead.[2] The call up for the present elections also happened in the shadow of the latest Israeli military offensive into Gaza in November 2012, Operation Pillar of Defense.[3] In the intervening four years, the Netanyahu led government had a roller coaster ride with major upheavals in the region and within Israel.

Netanyahu commenced his term on a positive note when he expressed support for a two state solution with Palestine during his speech at the Bar Ilan University in June 2009.[4] Other positives included his famous September 2011 speech in the UN General Assembly wherein he rebutted Palestine's application for full statehood and won applause from his domestic audience by stating that "Israel wants peace…. I want peace.… we cannot achieve peace through U.N. resolutions, but only through direct negotiations … so far the Palestinians have refused to negotiate. ….. Palestinians want a state without peace. And the truth is you shouldn't let that happen."[5] Further, the successful release of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit

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[1]   Result of 2009 elections available at http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/History/Modern+History/Historic+Events/Elections_in_Israel_February_2009.htm, last accessed on 12 January 2013.

[2]   Amnesty International Report, *Israel/Gaza: Operation 'Cast Lead': 22 days of death and destruction*, available at http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE15/015/2009/en/8f299083-9a74-4853-860f-0563725e633a/mde150152009en.pdf, last accessed on 12 January 2013.

[3]   *Operation Pillar of Defence-IDF Updates*, available at http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Terrorism-+Obstacle+to+Peace/Terrorism+and+Islamic+Fundamentalism-/Operation_Pillar_of_Defense_Nov_2012-IDF_updates.htm, last accessed on 12 January 2013.

[4]   Full Text of speech is available at http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Speeches+by+Israeli+leaders/2009/Address_PM_Netanyahu_Bar-Ilan_University_14-Jun-2009.htm, last accessed on 12 January 2013.

[5]   Full Text of speech is available at http://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/66/IL_en.pdf, last accessed on 12 January 2013.

from Hamas custody on 28 October 2011, the first Israeli soldier ever to be released alive, was another high point of Netanyahu's present tenure.[6]

On the other hand, Netanyahu's present term has left Israel losing ground both domestically as well regionally. The most significant downswing has been the increase in trust deficit with the United States over American policies in the Middle East and the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP). While President Obama talked of restarting the MEPP and forging a new partnership with the Arab World in his Cairo speech,[7] Netanyahu announced the construction of 1600 new houses in East Jerusalem in March 2010 just when US Vice President Biden was visiting Israel[8] in an attempt to kick-start the peace process. Obama even refused to meet Netanyahu during the latter's visit to Washington in September 2011 because of Netanyahu's sharpened demands for a tougher US line against Iran and threat of military action whereas the United States wanted to give diplomacy another chance.[9] Within Israel, Netanyahu was confronted by mass country-wide protests in July 2011 demanding action on rising house prices and rents, low salaries, the high cost of raising children and other social issues.[10] Coming on the back of popular Arab uprisings in the Middle East, these protests were a stark reminder that the government was ignoring domestic policies.

Israel and the Region: 2009-2012

A critical appraisal of Israel's standing in the immediate neighbourhood and the Middle East at large clearly indicates that the country stands more isolated and alienated than ever. Even countries and areas hitherto considered neutral or friendly have turned hostile, although all of this was not Israel's making. This is especially case with the Arab Spring, which has brought about changes both within individual countries as well as in the region as a whole. Domestically and internationally, new actors are emerging while others are

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[6]   Details of his release available at http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15339604, last accessed on 12 January 2013.

[7]   Full Text of speech is available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09, last accessed on 12 January 2013.

[8]   Ethan Bronner, "As Biden Visits, Israel Unveils Plan for New Settlements," *New York Times*, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/10/world/middleeast/10biden.html?_r=0, last accessed on 12 January 2013.

[9]   Matt Spetalnick and Allyn Fisher-Ilan, "In unusual snub, Obama to avoid meeting with Netanyahu," available at http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/09/11/us-israel-iran-netanyahu-idUSBRE88A10B20120911, last accessed on 12 January 2013.

[10]   Luke Browne and Harriet Sherwood, "Thousands protest in Israel over house prices and low salaries," *The Guardian*, available at http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jul/31/protest-israel-house-prices-salaries, last accessed on 12 January 2013.

fading in importance. Islamist parties are on the rise and economic concerns have risen to the fore.

Among the regional powers, Israel has been hit the hardest by the Arab Spring. It lost Mubarak, its time tested ally, who had ensured peace between Egypt and Israel. Now the 1978 peace treaty hangs in the balance although the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt has not yet indicated its intent to abandon the treaty. Sinai Peninsula, the buffer between Egypt and Israel, has suddenly erupted and caused concern in Israel.[11] Egypt has also decided to reopen Rafah crossing into the West Bank.[12] When Egypt permitted two Iranian warships to cross the Suez Canal in February 2011 (the first time such an event has happened since the 1979 Iranian Revolution), it naturally caused alarm in Israel.[13]

Israel's ties with other countries in the region have also become unsettled. It has fallen out with Turkey (yet another regional leader) post the Gaza Flotilla incident of May 2010. With civil war raging in Syria, Israel fears that Assad would finally be forced out, thus disturbing the fragile peace on Israel's eastern borders. Jordan could go the way of Islamists any time, which would spell more trouble for Israel. The Palestinians have already been given the status of Non Member Observer status in the United Nations in 2012.[14] Post the November 2012 Israeli military action in Gaza, the Palestinians (especially Hamas) seem to have gained the moral high ground. There are even indications of reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah as seen during the highest level talks in Egypt on 09-10 January.[15] Finally, Iran continues with its nuclear programme and despite the alarms raised by Israel, there are hardly any takers for military action against Iran.

Israel thus finds itself well and truly isolated in the region. With waning support from the United States, things could turn worse for Israel post the 22 January elections.

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[11] See Rajeev Agrawal, "Sinai: The Middle East' New Hot Spot," *IDSA Issue Brief*, available at http://www.idsa.in/issuebrief/SINAITheMiddleEastsNewHotSpot_ragarwal_301112, last accessed on 12 January 2013.

[12] *"Egypt reopens Rafah crossing after Sinai attack,"* RT News, *26 August 2012, available at http://rt.com/news/egypt-opens-rafah-crossing-574/, last accessed on 12 January 2013.*

[13] "Iranian warships sail through Suez Canal," *CNN News*, 22 February 2011, available at   http://articles.cnn.com/2011-02-22/world/egypt.iran.warships_1_suez-canal-ships-egypt?_s=PM:WORLD , last accessed on 12 January 2013.

[14] Report available at http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2012/ga11317.doc.htm, last accessed on 12 January 2013.

[15] "Hamas, Fatah hold new round of reconciliation talks in Egypt," available at http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2013/Jan-10/201609-hamas-fatah-hold-new-round-of-reconciliation-talks-in-egypt.ashx#ixzz2HmMWJ9rm, last accessed on 12 January 2013.

Election Process

Israeli legislators (Members of the Knesset or MK) are elected through a representative system of voting, in which the entire country is treated as a single electoral district. Israelis cast their votes for a single "list" of candidates. A list may contain members of one or more parties. Smaller parties will frequently opt to run on a single combined list with one or more other parties in order to improve their electoral chances. Following the elections, these groups may or may not remain aligned in the Knesset. Members are ranked on their party's list according to the outcomes of closed party primaries. A candidate with a higher ranking has a greater chance of being elected. Thus, if a party wins only a single seat in the Knesset, only the first party member on the list will become an MK. Parties win seats in the 120-member Knesset according to the number of votes their list receives. The only restriction on this highly representative system is that a list must receive votes in excess of a 2 per cent threshold to be eligible to hold a seat. Following elections, the Israeli president asks the party most likely to assemble a successful coalition to form a new government.

The system of nationwide proportional representation gives disproportionate influence to minor parties and is one of the major factors behind coalitions. As no party comes close to winning a majority of the seats in the Knesset, any party seeking to form a government must create a coalition with several smaller parties. These coalitions often lead to strange bedfellows, bringing together parties with even opposing ideologies.

The opportunity for many parties to participate in the Knesset, however, offers wide representation to many segments of Israel's politically and religiously diverse society. Yet, because the coalition-forming party is forced to align with many smaller parties that are ideologically or religiously extreme, political power is skewed towards these minority factions which skilfully use their position to make or break coalitions and impose their agendas. Fragile coalitions of disparate parties lack the unity and durability needed to conduct coherent policy planning and sound governance. In its history of 60 years, only one Knesset has lasted its entire four-year term; 32 governments have been in power so far and since 2001 there have been four prime ministers.

Election Prospects: 2013

All polls and estimates indicate Netanyahu's return as Prime Minister, this time with a larger margin and a stronger coalition. On October 25, 2012, Prime Minister and Likud chairman Benjamin Netanyahu and Foreign Minister and Yisrael Beiteinu chairman Avigdor Lieberman announced the unification of their two parties, which would run as a single bloc for the upcoming election. The new party is called Likud Beiteinu ("The Likud Is Our Home"), with Netanyahu number one on the list followed by Lieberman as number two. The new formation seems to have added weight to the two parties' combined prospects in the elections.

With only a few days to go until elections, most polls show the political right coupled with Hareidi parties enjoying a clear lead. The poll, published by *Yisrael Hayom*,[16] shows Likud Beiteinu well ahead with 35 seats. The left-wing Labor party remained a distant second with 17 seats, and Bayit Yehudi (Jewish Home) was the third-largest with 14 seats. Both the Shas and Yesh Atid parties are predicted to gain 11 seats, while Tzipi Livni's Hatnua (Movement) party may get 9. The survey showed Kadima, the current Knesset's largest faction, passing the minimum vote threshold with just two seats.

While Likud maintained a clear lead over other individual parties, the survey showed that there may be cause for concern regarding the possible unification of centre-left factions. If Yesh Atid, Labor and Hatnua were to present a joint leadership, they could rival Likud Beiteinu in size. At the same time, Tzipi Livni has expressed interest in a centre-left united front, but Labor's response has been sceptical while Yesh Atid has showed disinterest.

In addition, Likud Beiteinu appears to have more coalition options than the left bloc. Together with Bayit Yehudi, Shas, and the Hareidi-religious Yahadut Hatorah (UTJ) faction, it would have a majority of 66 seats. On the left, Meretz is predicted to get four seats. The Arab factions are expected to maintain their current 11 seats. The breakaway factions Am Shalem and Otzma Leyisrael are still struggling near the voting threshold, and the Yisrael Hayom survey showed both failing to pass the minimum. While 20 to 25 per cent of voters remain undecided, it would take a miracle to stop Netanyahu from returning to power for a third term.

The Future

Israel faces a challenging future after the elections. It can no longer blindly trust the United States. With Obama set for his second term, Netanyahu could face difficulties on his stand towards Palestine and Iran. With respect to Egypt and President Morsi, Israel would need to tread carefully, especially due to the Muslim Brotherhood's ideological affiliation with the Palestine cause. Reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah could throw up new challenges. Elsewhere too in the region, Israel and Netanyahu would face hostility and isolation if the present trend of Israeli policies towards the region continues or even strengthens.

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[16]   "Poll: Likud Beytenu, Left are Neck on Neck," available at http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/164094#.UPApEuQ3uM4, last accessed on 12 January 2013.

As the current Israeli President stated in an interview published in the *New York Times* on 9 January,

> "If there is no diplomatic decision, the Palestinians will go back to terror, knives, mines, suicide attacks. Most of the world will support the Palestinians, justify their actions, level the sharpest criticism at us, falsely label us a racist state… The problem is that Obama would like to reach peace in the Middle East and has to be convinced that Israel agrees with this…President Obama thinks that peace should be made with the Muslim world. We, the State of Israel, do not appear to be thinking along those lines." He also added a word of caution: "We must not lose the support of the United States. What gives Israel bargaining power in the international arena is the support of the United States.… If Israel were to stand alone, its enemies would swallow it up. Without U.S. support … we would be like a lone tree in the desert."[17]

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[17]   Ronen Bergman, "Shimon Peres on Obama, Iran and the Path to Peace," *New York Times*, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/13/magazine/shimon-peres-on-obama-iran-and-the-path-to-peace.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&, last accessed on 12 January 2013.