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Foreign Policy in the Legislative Elections in Israel

Patrycja Sasnal, Michał Wojnarowicz

The elections to the Israeli Knesset, scheduled for 17 March, are taking place in a specific international context of a destabilised neighbourhood, renewed tensions with Palestine, ongoing talks on the Iranian nuclear programme, and a new dispute with Israel's most important ally, the United States. Foreign policy has therefore become an important subject in the electoral campaign. The shape of the future coalition and its immediate decisions will weigh on Israel's standing on the international arena.

Two main parties are competing for the first place in this year's elections. These are Benjamin Netanyahu's ruling Likud, and the electoral bloc of the Zionist Union, established by the Labour Party under the leadership of Yitzhak Herzog and Tzipi Livni's party The Movement. Current polls indicate that both parties could receive approximately 23 out of 120 seats, although most recently the Zionist Union is slightly ahead. The polls place the Arab Joint List, a joint bloc of the Arab parties, in third place in terms of support. Among the right wing parties, Naftali Bennett's party The Jewish Home, which has a radical national profile, enjoys the greatest support. The following of the "Russian" party Israel Our Home, led by Avigdor Lieberman, has decreased significantly. Polls indicate that his party may receive only a few per cent of the vote, or may even fail to reach the electoral threshold. The centrist parties record decent results. The liberal There is a Future party, led by Yair Lapid, and a newcomer, the centre right party Together, led by former Likud minister Moshe Kahlon, perceive themselves as kingmakers, necessary coalition partners. According to the polls, the leftist Meretz would also pass the electoral threshold, which was raised last year to 3.25%.

The Palestinian Question. No party considers the possibility of unifying Israel with the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and creating a single state with the Palestinians ("the one state solution"). Support for the two state solution is dominant among the leftists and centrists. The Jewish Home is the main exception among Israeli parties in this case. Bennett's party disavows the validity of the peace process altogether, and its programme calls for the annexation of area C of the Palestinian Authority, with all Jewish settlements. Palestinian autonomy itself should be maintained in areas A and B. With the exception of the Arab parties and Meretz, the rest of the political scene is unanimous in the rejection of the "right of return" for the Palestinians. All parties, in general, agree on the necessity of land swaps if an independent Palestinian state is established. Likud firmly rejects the possibility of further, unilateral withdrawals from the occupied territories, as happened in Gaza in 2005. Both centrist parties (Together and There is a Future), and the left (Zionist Union) favour inclusion of the cross-border settlement blocks to Israel (including Ariel, Gush Etzion and Maale Adumim) as part of a peace agreement. Settlers are backed by right-wing parties led by The Jewish Home, which calls for the legalisation of settlements. The left-wing parties and There is a Future most decidedly declare the need to freeze funding for the settlements beyond the border area. However, they support "natural growth" in existing settlements. The Together party advocates expansion of settlements in east Jerusalem. Yitzhak Herzog, chairman of the Labour Party, declared that he would be willing to evacuate settlements as part of a peace agreement, upon consultation with the settlers themselves and with proper compensation for them. Israeli parties speak firmly in favour of the unity of Jerusalem, and only Meretz and Arab parties recognise the possibility of establishing the capital of the Palestinian state there. As usual, Israel Our Home advocates the incorporation southern Galilee, populated mainly by Arabs, into the Palestinian State. Other Arab states would have to be party to such an agreement.

The recognition of Israel as a Jewish state, and giving more socio-political rights to Jewish citizens, which were the postulates exhorted by the Likud and Israel Our Home in the last round of peace talks, have been rejected by all other parties. At this moment, Likud also rejects reactivation of any talks, which in turn is the main demand of the

Zionist Union. Both parties emphasise the importance of maintaining Israel's control over the Jordan Valley. Centrist parties (Together and There is a Future), and outline the need for demilitarisation of Gaza Strip. There is a Future suggests that this is carried out under the auspices of international monitors. Israel Our Home calls for total annihilation of Hamas (including an introduction of the death penalty for terrorism). The positions of religious parties situate them between Likud and The Jewish Home, but traditionally they are not very active with regard to foreign policy.

The Iranian Nuclear Programme and Relations with the United States. In the controversial speech to the U.S. Congress on 3 March, the Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, did not address the Palestinian issue at all. His speech was entirely devoted to the necessity of stopping the Iranian nuclear programme, which is the absolute priority for him and his party. The main weapon against Iran, in his words, would be to maintain and expand economic sanctions. The conditions for their abolition would include Iran giving up its intention to destroy Israel, and halting its support for terrorism in the Middle East. The speech was sharply criticised by the Israeli opposition, which stressed that it deepened the crisis in relations with the United States and did not contain any constructive alternatives. The deterioration of the strategic relationship with the United States, closely related to the issue of Iran, and Israel's deepening international isolation, are the main points of criticism of Netanyahu and his government.

A call for the restoration of relations between the U.S. and Israel can be found in the manifestoes of all parties, with the exception of the religious ones, traditionally neutral in these matters. The parties point out the need to address the issue of Iran's nuclear programme, with the participation of the international community, in terms of both negotiations and sanctions. Party leaders agree that Iran's actions constitute an existential threat to Israel and would push the Middle East into a nuclear race. Naftali Bennett is in favour of a total ban on uranium enrichment by Iran, and suggests the introduction of strict sanctions aimed at suffocating the Iranian economy. Like the prime minister, he also critically evaluates the agreement accords proposed by U.S. President Barack Obama's administration. Centrist party leaders Yair Lapid and Moshe Kahlon advocate reinforcing ties with countries in the region in order to form a common front against Iran and complete its denuclearisation. There is a Future's programme talks explicitly about the possibility of military action to stop the Iranian programme. Neither has Yitzhak Herzog ruled out the use of force to complement the diplomatic track, and he also emphasised that Israel should not dabble in internal U.S. politics, but should work towards building bipartisan and presidential unity in the United States on the Iranian issue.

The parties also agree that it is necessary to strengthen, structurally consolidate and increase funding for *hasbara*, the Israeli public diplomacy that works to improve Israel's image internationally. Relations with other countries in the Middle East are rarely mentioned in party programmes and declarations. However, they underscore the importance of maintaining close cooperation with regional allies Egypt and Jordan (in the context of Palestine), and the Gulf States (in the context of Iran). The issues of relations with Turkey and the civil war in Syria are hardly present at all.

Netanyahu's Plebiscite. The specificity of the Israeli political scene always requires the creation of a coalition government. Historical examples show that the pre-election declarations of Israeli politicians should not be trusted. However, Netanyahu has ruled out the possibility of forming a government of national unity with the Zionist Union. Such an option has not been ruled out by Herzog, although Livni has distanced herself from an agreement with the right wing. The president, Reuben Rivalin, has announced he would seek to form a national unity government in the event of a tie. The Arab Joint List has ruled out any coalition, including one with the left, as long as the occupation of the West Bank continues. The Jewish Home has called for unconditional maintenance of the settlements in the West Bank if it is to be part of a coalition, and for *There is a Future* the red line is keeping the Haredi Draft Law. Avigdor Lieberman has recently become surprisingly critical of Netanyahu's policy, which may increase his party's coalition potential.

Any future coalition will seek to mitigate conflicts with the United States, especially after the U.S. presidential election. Reactivation of peace talks with the Palestinians is only possible in the case of a centre left coalition, and only with continuing U.S. interest in the talks. In almost all other cases, maintaining the status quo in the conflict between Israel and Palestine is to be expected. The positions of virtually all parties against Iran, and the proposed solutions for dealing with its nuclear programme, are very similar. Any future coalition is most likely to insist on the sharpest possible line of action against Iran from the international community. Such a stance on Iran, combined with a lack of initiative in talks with the Palestinians, may result in Israel's further isolation in the international arena.

This year's election is primarily a plebiscite on Netanyahu, who, if he keeps office for the full term, will succeed David Ben-Gurion as the longest-serving prime minister of Israel. However, opposition to the government is significant. On 7 March, approximately 40,000 people demonstrated against the government in Tel Aviv. It is certain that the election results will confirm the deep polarisation of Israeli society on foreign policy, especially on the Palestinian issue and Netanyahu's leadership.