



What's Changed In Israel – And What Hasn't

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Last week, Israelis went to the polls for the second time this year. The election, which was watched closely in the U.S. and throughout the region, was at its core a referendum on the country's larger-than-life Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, who has become an incredibly polarizing figure since taking office in 2009.

Netanyahu's political accomplishments are unquestionable. Over the past decade, he has worked diligently – and successfully – to strengthen Israel's economy, raise its standing as a world-class center for technology and innovation, and navigate safely through a succession of regional crises (from the "Arab Spring" to the Syrian civil war). These same achievements, however, have turned out to be something of a double-edged political sword for Netanyahu, allowing his opponents to argue that the country is now on firm enough footing to enable a changing of the guard.

The electoral results largely reflected this thinking. Although Netanyahu's conservative Likud party had a strong showing, it was edged out by the center-left Blue & White Party of former IDF chief of staff Benny Gantz, which captured the largest number of seats in the country's 120-member parliament. Yet neither Blue & White nor Likud find themselves with enough partners among Israel's other political parties to successfully create a ruling coalition.

As of this writing, Israel's political system appears to be deadlocked, with neither faction willing to give up their advantage and join a "national unity" government. Such an arrangement might still materialize, however. Or it might not, and the country could lurch toward yet another, deeply divisive, round of elections in the months ahead.

Yet, whatever happens on the political front, the country's foreign policy outlook, and its security priorities, will stay largely the same.

Of these, the most pressing is Iran. Israeli officials are now preoccupied with the next phase in Iran's Syria campaign, which has seen the Islamic Republic intensify its efforts to expand the lethality of Hezbollah's already-formidable missile arsenal. This "precision project" represents a grave threat to Israeli security, because – if completed – it will allow the Lebanese militia to much more effectively target Israeli cities and potentially overwhelm the country's missile defense capabilities.

Syria is likewise an overriding source of concern. Over the past several years, Iran's successful intervention in the Syrian civil war on behalf of the Assad regime has allowed it to entrench itself along Israel's northern border, and to initiate a multi-pronged strategy to establish a long-term political, economic and ideological presence in the country.

In response to both trends, a broad national consensus has emerged in Israel in favor of an increasingly expeditionary military strategy – one aimed at degrading the capabilities of Iran and its terrorist proxies along Israel's periphery. That campaign will assuredly continue under the next Israeli government.

The Palestinians also represent a significant problem, albeit a less pressing one. A decade ago, virtually every major Israeli political party had a plan for a path forward with the Palestinians. Today, by contrast, the Palestinian issue has been relegated to the margins of Israeli politics, largely because Israel's electorate has become convinced that there is simply no one to negotiate with on the Palestinian side. That view has been reinforced by the endemic corruption and political malaise that grips the Palestinian Authority, and by the sporadic violence instigated by Hamas and other radical factions based in the Gaza Strip.

In response, some Israeli officials have urged a more confrontational stance vis-à-vis the Palestinians – including, potentially, a long term, large-scale military operation to degrade Hamas' terror infrastructure. For now, however, there does not seem to be much national appetite in Israel for such an option. Neither is there broad support for Netanyahu's eleventh-hour campaign proposal to annex all settlements, a move that would greatly complicate prospects for eventual peace with the Palestinians. However, there is a widespread Israeli acceptance of another view: that, in light of the conditions above, the Palestinian problem is one that will simply need to be managed for the foreseeable future.

That lack of urgency is, in part, a reflection of Israel's increasingly favorable regional position. Over the past several years, the country has drawn considerably closer to assorted Arab states in the Gulf, propelled by common fears over Iran's activities and expansionism. As a result, Israel is now more secure and confident about its place in the Middle East than at any time in its history, and more willing to assert its prerogatives there.

Important, too, is the strengthening of Israel's most important strategic partnership – its ties to the United States – that has taken place in the Trump era. Since taking office, the current U.S. administration's pro-Israel tilt has yielded enormous dividends for the Jewish state, from the relocation of the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem to a recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights. This closeness will assuredly continue to be nurtured by the next Israeli Prime Minister, whether it ends up being Netanyahu or Gantz or even a third party.

"All politics," the saying goes, "is local," and this certainly holds true in Israel's case. The recent election may have been a referendum on Netanyahu, but it was not a plebiscite on his foreign policy. Israel's next leader, whoever that might be, can be expected to continue the same general course.