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The 2022 Israeli elections: Change, but no change

On 1 November 2022, Israelis will cast their votes to elect a new parliament for the 25th time since 1948. Between 1949 and 2019 (70 years), Israelis went to the polls 20 times. Each parliamentary assembly (Knesset) averaged 3.5 years. But between 2019 and 2022, Israelis voted four times. Each parliamentary assembly averaged only nine months. This brief examines some of the causes of Israel's political turmoil and assesses whether it matters for two issues of European concern: Israel's status as 'democratic' ally and the occupation of Palestine. Despite their evident shortcomings with regard to Israeli Arabs and Palestinians, we do not expect the Israeli elections of November 2022 to downgrade the country's allied status across European capitals. Neither do we anticipate the Israeli elections to moderate the country's policy of annexation in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Our analysis suggests instead that future Israeli governments will maintain majoritarian Jewish rule and expects it to be propelled by a more unapologetic and repressive ethno-nationalism. This will lead Israel further down the path of exclusionary governance and large-scale human rights violations that risks backfiring in the long term. It will also further erode the moral credibility of the European Union, including the Netherlands, in the areas of human rights and accountability.

Introduction

The direct cause of the recent political turmoil in Israel has been the increasingly divisive status of Benjamin Netanyahu as political leader due to his polarising style, corruption charges against him and his emphasis on political survival. From this viewpoint, the first parliament of the past four, in 2019, lived on borrowed time due to Netanyahu's temporary co-optation of Benny Gantz (the leader of Blue-White, a centre-right party). The next two parliamentary elections (also in 2019 and in 2020) failed to produce a government.¹ The 2021 parliamentary elections saw Netanyahu

ousted from office by a broad left-right coalition, united only in their dislike of him. This coalition produced the current Lapid/Bennett government. It fell over an artificial disagreement about renewing the application of Israeli civil law to settlers in the West Bank (rather than the military law that Palestinians face in Area C of the West Bank). The Netanyahu-led opposition, which is normally firmly behind this arrangement, tactically teamed up with its ideological opponents from Meretz and the United Arab List to trigger new elections.²

¹ Israel has a unicameral legislature that chooses the government from its members by simple majority. Members of cabinet retain their legislative seats.

² We thank Dimitris Bouris (University of Amsterdam) for his critical review of this brief, several interviewees based in Israel for their time and insights, and Matteo Colombo (Clingendael) for the infographic.

What's behind all these elections?

Taking a closer look shows several deeper factors at work behind the electoral turmoil of the past few years. A first factor is the longstanding trend of smaller parties gaining seats in the Knesset, despite an increase in the threshold to 3.25 per cent. This development has been reinforced more recently by greater fluctuations in the number of seats gained by parties from one election to another. Both are linked to the long-term decline of Israel's once dominant Labor party.³ Today, party creation, amalgamation and disappearance are fairly common. These make party relations less stable, causes high levels of turnover, and produces parliamentary fragmentation. For example, between eight and thirteen parties managed to obtain seats in the 120-member Knesset in each of the 2019–2021 elections, with typically only two or three parties winning between 10 and 36 seats, and the rest fewer.⁴ Stable rule is harder to realise when several smaller parties need to be incorporated to form a government with a legislative majority. Such parties often have outsized influence. A consequence is that governments are more focused on their own continuity and have less room for policy adjustment and innovation. Even modest policy deviations become harder to agree.⁵

A second factor influencing Israel's domestic political turmoil has been a gradual electoral shift since around 2010 to political parties and leaders favouring a right-wing form of ethnic-nationalism with religious undertones (its left-wing variant is similarly nationalist but more liberal and secular) as a result of developments such as the *de facto* abrogation of the Oslo peace agreement, recurrent violent conflict with Hamas, the

disappearance of Palestinians from public life in Israel and the growth of the settler constituency.⁶ By this shift, we mean the ascendancy of the view that a Jewish-run state⁷ should cover most land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan river (variations exist in scope and realisation).⁸ This means that a religious-nationalist extremist like Ben-Gvir can run in the November 2022 elections without creating uproar, despite his discourse building on Kahane's 'Jewish supremacy' thinking that flies in the face of the contemporary understanding of minority and human rights in a democracy.⁹ Support for the more left-wing and liberal variant of Zionist nationalism survives in parties like Labour and Meretz, but has mostly disappeared from centrist parties such as Blue-White and Yesh Atid. Political discourse has also shifted to the right, a trend that can be observed in a number of European countries as well.¹⁰ All of this creates highly visible public contestation within the Israeli center and right over the question where the new geographical and identity boundaries should lie. Political turmoil is the result. It also means that more right-wing and ethno-nationalist policies are likely in the near future.

Moreover, several indicators suggest that the right of the Israeli electorate votes more

3 For example: Plesner, Y., *Israel's Political System is Broken. Here is How to Fix It*, IDI, [online](#), 2021.

4 For recent election results: <https://en.idi.org.il/israeli-elections-and-parties/> (accessed 12 September 2022).

5 Dutch parliamentary composition and its coalition-based government system show similar trends.

6 Authors' research of past election results and discourse; interviews with two Israeli researchers in September 2022; see also: Heikal, F. et al., *Analyzing Israeli elections: Four polls in two years fail to fix political imbroglio*, [online](#), March 2021.

7 As Prime Minister Netanyahu put it on the US National Public Radio in 2019: "Israel is the national state, not of all its citizens, but only of the Jewish people." NPR, [online](#), 11 March 2019

8 See for example: Jerusalem Post, [online](#), 5 August 2019 or <https://jewishcurrents.org/kahanisms-raucous-return> (both accessed 24 October 2022).

9 Kahane essentially envisaged a state based on religious law dominated by Jews and incorporating parts of Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon as well as the occupied territories. See also: Ha'aretz, 9 September 2022, [online](#).

10 Dani Filc and Sharon Pardo, 'Israel's Right-Wing Populists: The European Connection', *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, Vol. 63(3): 99-122, 2021.

A snapshot of Israel's electorate

Key dimensions of the Israeli electorate of c. 6.5 million eligible voters (c. 73 per cent are Jewish and 20 per cent Arab) can be summarised as follows:

- *Israeli voters have socioeconomic priorities:* As the cost of living rises rapidly in a context of high inflation, voters primarily consider a party's position on the economy. A party's position on tensions between Israel's different social groups comes second. The perceived threat from Iran and climate change come third and fourth. The Palestinian issue ranks far lower.
- *Israeli voters turn out in numbers, but less so:* Fluctuating at around 80 per cent for decades, turnout dropped slightly below 70 per cent in the most recent election. The Israeli Arab vote has especially decreased, from 64.8 per cent in 2020 to 44.6 per cent in 2021.
- *The Israeli right is more heterogeneous than the left in its composition:* Israel as a society has many cleavages based on e.g. ethnicity, religion and income. The left is somewhat more homogeneous than the right, with the latter being more religious, having lower average incomes, and with more Jews originating from the MENA (Mizrahi) than from Europe (Ashkenazi).
- *Most Israelis that self-define as religious vote for the right:* But not all right-wing voters are religious. Many consider themselves secular or as 'practising' without prioritising their religious identity.

Sources: Anabi (2022), op.cit.; Rudnitzky, A., *The Arab Vote in the Elections for the 24th Knesset*, IDI, [online](#), 2021.

consistently than its left and centre.¹¹ Likud, for instance, retained 30–36 Knesset seats between 2015 and 2022 and it took an eight-party coalition to unseat Netanyahu, including a right-wing party like New Right. Smaller right-wing religious parties like Shas and United Torah Judaism have also performed steadily. In contrast, more left and centre-leaning Israeli Arab voters (c. 20 per cent of the electorate) have lower turnout rates due to a mix of ideological objections, marginalisation and disappointment. In addition to being largely ignored by the Israeli Jewish right, this decreases their influence. Finally, a recent poll by the Israel Democracy Institute indicates that 78 per cent of voters for opposition parties (mostly right wing at the moment) intend to vote for

the same party, as opposed to 44 per cent of coalition voters.¹² In other words, the noted shift to the right is likely to consolidate in the short term.

The evolving identity of Israel as state and society

Five elections in four years suggest greater social dynamics are in play than shifting voter patterns and a fragmented political party scene. They point to a deeper contestation between social groups and forces that vote political party candidates into office. Based on the preceding analysis, the past few

11 Anabi, O., *Jewish Israeli Voters Moving Right*, IDI, [online](#), August 2022.

12 Hermann, T. and O. Anabi, *Only Half of Israelis Intend to Repeat Their 2021 Vote*, IDI, [online](#), August 2022.

elections also signal that Israel is redefining its identity as state and society. At stake is how the country wishes to manage its multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition. This goes beyond Israeli-Arab-Palestinian divides – even though they are a large part of the equation – and includes a number of intra-Jewish cleavages around religion, social status and origin.

Political discourse, government behaviour and social change over the past decade suggest that the dominant principle for managing such divides will be a more visible and less apologetic ethno-religious nationalism that favours Jewish citizens, and aspires to the further expansion of the Israeli state.¹³ Israel's political elites may seek to improve the socioeconomic status of their Israeli Arab citizens out of self-interest, but will continue to consider Palestinians as collateral damage to their own statebuilding process. The two key problems for the future of Israeli democracy, of which its electoral turmoil of the past few years is indicative, are its population growth resulting from respectively the wars of 1948 and 1967. Both brought large groups of Palestinians under control of the new Israeli state, but they have followed different trajectories.

The democratic problem of 1948

Many Palestinians fled what became Israel in 1948. Today, they constitute part of the population of Jordan, a global diaspora and c. 5 million refugees in the care of the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) who live in the countries neighbouring Israel. Yet thousands of Palestinians remained, mostly in the Galilee. Only after 1967 did this group gradually acquire greater rights. They ultimately became Israeli Arab citizens.¹⁴ Today, they constitute c. 20 per cent of Israel's population. Their

socioeconomic status is lower than that of Israeli Jews¹⁵ and they remain politically and economically marginalised, mostly due to a quasi-cordon sanitaire by right-wing Israeli Jewish parties and their own divisions. Despite the atrocities their forbears faced,¹⁶ Israeli Arabs largely self-define as Israeli with voters demanding greater state support to improve their socioeconomic position and safety. On the whole, this group sets a low bar for inclusion as equals in the Israeli polity. Yet, this has so far only happened to a limited degree.

The primary proof of limited inclusion is the Knesset's passing of the nation-state law in July 2018.¹⁷ This defines Israel as a Jewish state with Hebrew as its only national language, encourages the establishment of Jewish settlements in the West Bank, and recognises Israel as the Jewish nation's historical homeland. A recent judgment in the city of Karmiel made explicit reference to the nation-state law by rejecting state funding for school transport of Israeli Arab children on the grounds that it would be desirable if there were fewer, and not more, residents with this identity.¹⁸ Similar but less prominent proofs include the 2011 'Nakba law' prohibiting public financing of organisations commemorating war crimes and Palestinian losses during the foundation of Israel,¹⁹ and the Ministry of Education's recent prohibition of the reintroduction of

13 Encompassing large parts of the West Bank and the entirety of East Jerusalem in vague resonance with the boundaries the ancient kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

14 For a retrospective look at the situation in 1987: Grossman, D., *The yellow wind*, New York: Picador, 1988.

15 See for example: Haj-Yahya, N. et al., *Statistical Report on Arab Society in Israel: 2021*, Israel Democracy Institute, 2022.

16 Cypel, S., *Crimes et refoulement. La mémoire sélective de la société israélienne*, Orient XXI, [online](#), 2022 ; see also the work of the 'New Israeli Historians' like Benny Moris and Ilan Pappé.

17 See: <https://main.knesset.gov.il/EN/activity/Documents/BasicLawsPDF/BasicLawNationState.pdf> (accessed 22 September 2022).

18 See: [For the first time, the court relied on the Nation-State Law, rejecting the claim of Arab children from Karmiel](#) (blinker.co.il) (accessed 21 September 2022).

19 See: <https://www.adalah.org/uploads/oldfiles/Public/files/Discriminatory-Laws-Database/English/33-Budget-Foundations-Law-Amendment40-Nakba-Law.pdf> (accessed 22 September 2022).

the Green Line in school curricula by the municipality of Tel Aviv.²⁰

On a more positive note, the participation of the Israeli Arab Ra'am party in the 2021 Lapid/Bennett coalition helped to vote through a new five-year plan for the socioeconomic development of the Israel Arab community worth c. US\$9.3 billion. This followed on the heels of a 2015 plan that allocated c. \$3.8 billion for the same purpose. While implementation of these funds is mired in bureaucracy and change comes slowly, they do show some recognition of Israeli Arab problems, even though they do not address root causes of political and social marginalisation.²¹

The democratic problem of 1967

Israel's conquest of Gaza, the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights was a feat of arms and redemption for many Jews. Yet, the six-day war of 1967 also established Israeli control over millions of Palestinians. For decades, they enjoyed only the rights granted to them on paper by international humanitarian law and the Geneva conventions. Israeli security and administrative oversight was partially outsourced to the Palestinian Authority in 1993–1995 through the Oslo Accords. But these accords did not survive the failure of the Camp David summit in 2000, the Second Intifada (also 2000), the defeat of Ehud Barak (Labour) by Ariel Sharon (Likud) in 2001 and Hamas coming to power in Gaza in 2006. Since then, Israeli military and administrative rule over West Bank Area C has transformed into de facto military control over the entire West Bank. This situation is often framed as being external to Israeli democracy,²² but this is not tenable due to

decades-long illegal occupation and a lack of progress in implementing the two-state solution envisaged by the Oslo Accords. The fact of the matter is that Palestinians cannot participate in Israeli elections despite being subject to Israeli rule, as is the Palestinian Authority.

It is this population group that poses a fundamental challenge to the ethno-nationalist and expansionary vision of the Israeli right. Territorial partition based on a variant of the two-state solution runs counter to its *nationalist* component since that envisages Israeli annexation of significant parts of the West Bank and all of East Jerusalem. Integration of Palestinians into the Israeli polity runs counter to its *ethnic-religious* component since that envisages Jewish primacy. The only solution within this frame are variations of occupation and repression.

The continuous territorial growth of the state of Israel offers the primary proof that such a solution is indeed pursued. Settlements in the West Bank have expanded under practically every Israeli government irrespective of its political inclination. The pace of construction accelerated notably during the Netanyahu-Trump years,²³ as did realisation of Israeli claims on the Golan and East Jerusalem. There is also a long track record of settlers engaging in violence against their Palestinian neighbours with impunity and with the full support of Israeli security and intelligence forces – despite the settlers' presence being illegal under international law.²⁴ None of these issues have been reversed or addressed under the Bennett/Lapid government. Contrary to its professed commitment to the status quo, the Bennett/Lapid government instead dusted off old plans for the expansion of the E1, Atarot and Lower Aqueduct settlements (among others). Construction of these settlements would completely separate East

20 The Green Line is the 1949 armistice line that formed Israel's border until 1967 and still constitutes its official border under international law. See: Ha'aretz, [online](#), 9 September 2022.

21 The *Times of Israel*, [online](#), 24 June 2022; Authors' interviews in 2017 and 2022.

22 Eiran, E., 'Democracy and Foreign Affairs in Israel', in: Asseburg and Goren, *Democratic Backsliding and Securitization*, MITVIM, SWP and PAX, 2022.

23 European Union, *2021 Report on Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem*, [online](#), 2022 (accessed 22 September 2022).

24 For an overview of 2020 to 2022: https://www.btselem.org/settler_violence_updates_overview (accessed 22 September 2022).

Israeli parties in the 2022 Knesset during the Lapid-Bennett government



Sources: Knesset, authors' analysis

Jerusalem from the West Bank and eliminate the possibility of Jerusalem existing as a shared Israeli-Palestinian capital.²⁵

Back to the elections of November 2022

A pessimist may see Israel as a majoritarian Jewish democracy²⁶ with tiered rights based on identity, significant disenfranchisement and discrimination. Others, like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, argue that Israel is already committing the crime of apartheid based on the United Nations' International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of

the Crime of Apartheid (1976) and other sources of international law. Either way, the ethno-nationalist frame that has inevitably dominated Israeli politics since 1948 is being stripped of its limited liberal and human rights vestiges and taking an uglier discriminatory and expansionary turn.²⁷

Most European partners of Israel, including the Netherlands, have so far chosen to ignore this reality by clinging to the notion of Israel as 'the only democracy in the Middle East' and by incantation of the two-state solution.²⁸ In the process, they also ignore links between the Likud party

25 Peace Now, *The government of unequivocal annexation*, [online](#), June 2022.

26 As opposed to a constitutional democracy. Even the existence of a Jewish majority between the Jordan river and the Mediterranean is in doubt according to a recent population assessment: Times of Israel, [online](#), 30 August 2022.

27 Dani Shenhar's recent remarks in The Netherlands on the growing number of appointments of judges with ties to settlements since 2015 are a case in point. See: *Nederlands Dagblad*, [online](#), 27 September 2022.

28 Prime Minister Lapid's support for the two state solution at the 2022 UN General Assembly was rhetorically expedient but not supported by any action. See for example: <https://twitter.com/AnshelPfeffer/status/1572987175448231937>

and European populist parties based on a shared demonization of Islam, such as the Flemish Interest (Belgium), Fidesz (Hungary), the Alternative for Germany, the Northern League (Italy), the PVV (Netherlands) and others,²⁹ in spite of the millions of European citizens professing the Islamic faith.

European governments are more concerned with maintaining good bilateral relations than paying attention to democracy and citizenship at home, or human rights and international law abroad. In doing so, they find themselves in the company of recent signatories of the Abraham Accords, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain.³⁰ This policy prioritisation is far from unique and also shapes European relations with countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt. All have poor human rights records and are short on meaningful democratic credentials.

The difference between these countries and Israel is that the professed EU objectives of realising a two-state solution, respecting international law and upholding human rights stand in stark contrast to the absence of concrete EU actions to achieve its stated policy objectives, which undermines their credibility. The revival of the EU-Israel Association Council on 3 October 2022 dispelled any lingering doubts in this regard. This discrepancy between policy and practice undermines the credibility of the global human rights and accountability agenda of the EU and its Member States.

The Israeli elections of November 2022 are likely to continue and deepen these trends: European dishonesty, Israeli democratic regression, and the occupation of Palestine. In a time when populism is on the rise in Europe and the war in Ukraine is being fought over the principle of self-determination, this is a dangerous course to take.


29 Filc and Pardo (2021), *op.cit.*

30 Morocco and Sudan normalised relations shortly after, based on diplomatic quid pro quos with the US that recognised Morocco's claim over the Western Sahara and removed Sudan from its list of state sponsors of terrorism.

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