ISRAELI ELECTION RESULTS AND TURKEY

BY MUHAMMED **AMMASH**

INTRODUCTION

Benjamin Netanyahu, who was heading the last two governments, won the Israeli elections held in 17 March 2015[1]. Despite all the predictions and evaluations made until election day showing Netanyahu in the second row, and despite the victory speeches made by other party leaders at election night, with the announcement of the official results in the morning of March 18th Netanyahu's victory was definite.

While Netenyahu gained 30 seats in the 120-member Knesset with 23.4 percent of the votes, HaMahane HaZioni (Zionist Union), which is jointly led by Isaac Herzog and Tzipi Livni, was able to get 24 of the Knesset seats with 18.67 percent of the votes[2].

On the other side, the Joint List, which is one of this election's limelight parties and, which mainly represents Israeli Arabs, became the third biggest power in the Israeli Parliament. The results demonstrate that four left-wing and six right-wing parties gained representation in the Knesset. In the new picture of the 120 seat Knesset, the number of right-wing representatives exceeds 60 --the number needed to form a coalition-- while the number of left-wing seats including the Joint List remained at 53.

Under ordinary circumstances, the President would assign the mission of forming the new government to the strongest candidate that could establish a coalition, by taking into consideration the recommendations of representatives from all political parties in the Knesset. In this context, the President may either assign this mission to the party leader who did not get the majority of the votes; or demand the formation of a national unity government consisting of the two parties that won most of the votes.

However, taking into account Netenyahu's statements that reveal his desire for a "national" government, and Zionist Union leader Hergoz's announcement indicating that being in the opposition is the "only realistic option", the possibility of a national unity government seems to be eliminated[3].

The government that will be formed during the forthcoming month in Netanyahu's leadership will most probably be comprised of center right-wing and extreme right-wing parties after negotiations are conducted.

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[1] Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu: Commando turned PM.
[2] See for official results
[3] Herzog: The opposition is the Zionist Union's only realistic option
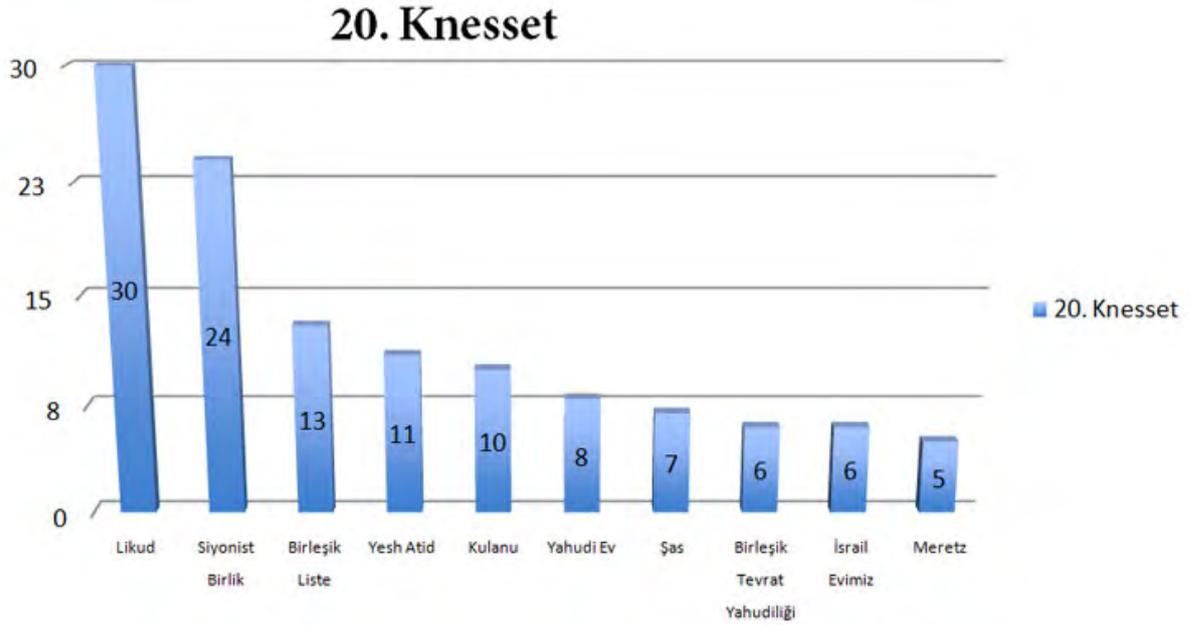
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20. Knesset

Figure 1: 20th Knesset election results

THE MEANING OF THE RESULTS FOR TURKEY

A right-wing coalition leadership has importance with regards to Turkey-Israel relations since Netanyahu indicated the day before the elections that no Palestinian State will emerge on his watch, while he also targeted Israeli Arabs who were going to ballot boxes calling his supporters to go vote.

Although Netanyahu's statements and acts are within the scope of his efforts to collect right-wing votes, there were no positive developments regarding the Palestinian Question during his term of office in the last six years. The number of Jewish settlements increased[4], thousands died in two wars in the Gaza Strip but no alternative solutions were developed, and no step was taken towards ending the occupation of the West Bank.

At the same time, in the process that resulted in the government's dissolution, Netanyahu insisted that the Jewish State draft a bill for the recognition of Israel as a Jewish State. Taking into account all these factors, Netanyahu's and Israeli right-wing parties' approaches overburden the pursuit for a two-state solution. Hence the hopes for normalizing the relations with Turkey, a country prioritizing two-state solution in its relation with Israel, are declining in the short term.

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[4] For more information, see:
1) Settlements and the Netanyahu Government
2) Netanyahu Established 20 New Settlements

Beside the Palestinian Question, the increase in income inequality and cost of living, are other issues of concern in Israel's main agenda. Moreover, one of the main sources for these problems, based on the Palestinian Question, is the allocation of state budget to security and to the construction of new settlements. In the forthcoming period, a strong attitude adopted by the opposition and the coalition partners could force Netanyahu for a policy change regarding the Palestinian Question.

New developments regarding Netanyahu's approach to the Palestinian Question may occur due to pressure by international actors. Palestine's admission to the International Criminal Court, the European Union members' steps towards recognizing the Palestinian State, and the position that the United States would adopt regarding Netanyahu's policies[5][6], could pave the way for new developments in this context.

WHAT HAPPENED?

What lies behind the early election decision taken in December 2014 is the disagreement among cabinet members. Netanyahu demanded to go to early elections after firing center party members Yair Lapid and Tzipi Livni due to their criticism of his policies[7].

In addition to being critical of Netanyahu's policies towards building new settlements, left-wing parties were frequently criticizing his administration of the country's economy. Especially after the failed negotiations with the Palestinian Authority, Netanyahu was accused by the ministers of isolating the country and opening Israel to criticism in the international arena.

On the other hand, the objections to the Jewish state draft bill that was backed by Prime Minister Netanyahu and Foreign Minister Liberman was another reason for the rise of tensions[8]. The so-called bill was attempting to consider Israel as the national homeland of the Jewish people; institutionalize Jewish law as an inspiration for legislation; and exclude Arabic as an official language. The bill that would harm Israel's democracy by excluding the minorities caused disagreements in the cabinet while being subject to US criticism[9].

With moving ahead towards the elections process, campaigns and movements intended to change the administration started to take place all around the country. The observable rise in the opposition against Netanyahu together with polls showing the race between the parties neck to neck, created the perception that a change would occur with the 17 March elections.

PROFILES OF THE NEW KNESSET

Right-wing parties

Likud: The last two terms' leading party Likud is a Zionist party in the center-right. The party that was founded by Israel's sixth Prime Minister Menachem Begin in 1973 was the first right-wing

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[5] Obama criticises Netanyahu's 'divisive rhetoric'
[6] U.S. 'to reevaluate' backing for Israel at U.N.
[7] Netanyahu Fires Ministers and Calls for Elections
[8] Coalition in turmoil after cabinet approves controversial 'Jewish state bill'
[9] U.S. responds to 'Jewish nation-state' bill: Israel must stick to its democratic principles

party in Israel to come to power in 1977. Benjamin Netanyahu, who will govern Israel for the fourth time after winning three other elections in 1996, 2009, and 2013, is the first politician to be in this position. Looking at the discourses and practices of the Prime Minister and his party that follow an approach focused on Israel's security; they concentrated on issues as the Iranian threat, Hamas, and ISIL in the last election campaign.

Especially after Western countries started taking steps towards recognizing the Palestinian State, Netanyahu repeated his position regarding the issue just a day before the elections by saying "no Palestinian state on my watch." In spite of the facts that these words were intended to collect right-wing votes and that he back-tracked following the elections, it is obvious that no significant steps were taken towards solving the Palestinian Question during his six years in power.

The Gaza wars in 2012 and 2014, which resulted in thousands of deaths, and the Mavi Marmara incident in 2010, occurred during his term and resulted in the break of political ties with Turkey.

Kulanu: The party, which its name means "all of us", was founded in November 2014 by Moshe Kahlon and joined the elections for the first time. Kulanu became the fifth party in the parliament and will be represented by 10 seats. It plays a key role in the process of forming the new government during the coming weeks[10]. Previous Minister of Welfare and Social Services and former member of the Likud, Moshe Kahlon, is more of a person who is focused on social and economic matters.

Habayit HaYehudi: One of the small parties of the new parliament, the Jewish Home, is a Zionist religious party. Its leader, Naftali Benett, who was heading the Ministry of Economy, will most probably be one of the partners of the new coalition.

Shas: The ultra-Orthodox party supported by Sephardic Jews will be represented in the Knesset by seven members.

United Torah Judaism: As another ultra-Orthodox party against Secularism it gained six seats in the Israeli Parliament.

Yisrael Beiteinu: Israel is Our Home Party entered the 2013 elections in a joint list with Likud, and its leader Avigdor Liberman was managing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As a nationalist-Zionist and a secular party, Yisrael Beiteinu's voter base mostly consists of the immigrants from Russian and Soviet soils, and will be represented by six members. The party's leader is generally known for his racist remarks against Palestinian citizens (and non-citizens). One of his recommendations in the peace process with Palestine is to swap lands and populations with Palestinians, reaching a goal of a fully Jewish country.

Left-wing parties

Zionist Union: The Zionist Union or the Zionist Front, which became the second largest party of the Knesset, was formed immediately after the early election decision by Israeli Labor Party and Hatnuah (Movement). The party's co-leaders are Labor's Isaac Bougie Herzog and Hatnuah's Tzipi Livni. While the Labor Party was the main opposition party in the previous parliament, Hatnuah was part of the 19th government coalition. Had they won the elections, both leaders of the block would serve as Prime Ministers with a rotation.

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[10] After Netanyahu's magic act, the cards are now in Kahlon's hand

Among Labor Party's former leaders were; Yitzhak Rabin, who signed various agreements with the Palestinians in the Oslo process and who was assassinated by an extreme-rightist Israeli; former Prime Minister and President Shimon Peres; and former Prime Minister Ehud Barak. As for Hatnuah's leader Tzipi Livni, she was the Minister of Justice in the previous government, and was fired by Netanyahu due to their disagreement.

> **"** *At the same time, it can be said that despite the polls showing the Union as the first party and despite the rise of anti-Netanyahu campaigns all around the country, having formed the alliance few months before the elections was a disadvantage for the party.*

The left-wing's biggest representative now, Zionist Union, is focused on socio-economic subjects such as the high cost of living and income inequality during their election campaign. As for the Palestinian Question, it supports the continuation of the negotiations with the Palestinians. Restoring good relations with the EU and the US was among the blocks goals before elections. However, according to different opinions the block's failure to present a concrete approach to the Palestinian Question and not showing an alternative to the occupation of the West Bank played a crucial role in their failure in the elections[11]. At the same time, it can be said that despite the polls showing the Union as the first party and despite the rise of anti-Netanyahu campaigns all around the country, having formed the alliance few months before the elections was a disadvantage for the party.

Yesh Atid: "There is a Future" party is a liberal party in the Center. Its leader and founder, former journalist Yair Lapid, was fired by Netanyahu from the previous cabinet where he was serving as the Minister of Finance after their disagreement. It will be in the new Knesset's opposition with fewer seats.

Meretz: Knesset's smallest party Meretz gained five seats in the last elections. In the new picture, the only party that has more female representation (3-2) than the other parties, Meretz is a social-democrat leftist party. Focusing on issues such as minority rights, gender issues, and freedom of belief, it is a leading supporter of the two-state solution in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Joint List: The third biggest party of the 20th Knesset was formed by the unification of the four parties mostly representing Israeli Arabs. These parties are: **1. Hadash** (the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality) – a communist party constituting of Arab and Jewish politicians. **2. Balad** (National Democratic Assembly) – an Arab nationalist, secular, and anti-Zionist political party. **3. Ra'am** (United Arab List) – party representing Islamist Arabs. **4. Ta'al** (Arab Movement for Renewal) – another secular, anti-Zionist party representing Israeli Arabs. The head of the Joint list is Hadash's leader Ayman Odeh.

The Palestinian-Israeli Arab minority that until the last elections used to go to the ballot boxes with different parties representing various ideologies, decided to enter these elections in a joint list, after the electoral threshold was raised from 2 to 3.25 percent by Liberman's initiative. The politicians who decided to act for the common purpose also aimed at increasing the Arab voter turnout. As a matter of fact, many Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel boycotted elections for the lack of unity among Arab parties. It is an issue of concern whether the Joint List, which created enthusiasm in Israeli politics, will continue this unity in the future and to what extent it will be effective in Israel's politics.

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[11] Zionist Union's occupation ostrich policy was a major factor in its defeat

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