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Position Paper



Election Year in Israel: Portends of the Coming Political Battle

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Mada al-Carmel
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Introduction

Israel has entered the year of parliamentary elections, whether they are held on time at the end of October 2026 or brought forward to an earlier date. The atmosphere has become dominated by electoral politics, party competition, and contentious disputes that were postponed during the war on Gaza.

Many analysts and politicians did not expect that Israel's governing coalition, and particularly its leader Benjamin Netanyahu, would succeed in holding out after the events of October 7, 2023, which were described as the biggest security failure since the October 1973 war. The coalition's partners realized that their government's disintegration and subsequent early elections without achieving security or military successes would affect the political mood in Israeli society and destroy their chances of returning to power after the elections.

However, despite crises, internal disagreements, and popular protests, the governing coalition succeeded in absorbing the political and security repercussions of the October 7 events. What helped this were Netanyahu's political maneuvers and the parliamentary opposition's weakness and its inability to formulate and propose an effective political alternative to his policies and conduct. Still, public opinion polls predict that Netanyahu's coalition will lose its parliamentary majority, gaining about 52 to 54 seats in the Knesset (compared to 64 seats after the last elections, and before the return of Gideon Saar's New Hope Party to the Likud Party and the governing coalition).¹

On the other hand, the coalition's cohesiveness and retention of power, the opposition's weakness (the same opinion polls give opposition parties 54 seats), and the opposition's need to ally with at least one Palestinian Arab party to form a coalition—not a desired scenario—keep Netanyahu as a central and powerful player on both the political and partisan levels in Israel. This is so despite the events of October 7, accusations of responsibility for the major security failure then, his ongoing legal troubles, and the broad protest movement against the government's plan to control the judiciary. Because he largely controls the contents and trajectories of the political situation, the purported results of the upcoming elections remain inconclusive today.

Issues of the Upcoming Elections

This position paper argues that the upcoming elections will reflect the state of realignment in Israeli society and in the party and political systems, a situation that has accumulated since the 2015 elections and has been further strengthened in the wake of the events of October 7, 2023.

The upcoming elections are expected to highlight the following trends:

- A reduction in the impact of the rift in Israeli society associated with the Palestinian cause and the occupation on voting patterns and in the competition between parties. Instead, a broad consensus is expected to become clearer within Israeli society that adheres to the traditional right-wing political platform which supports settlement expansion in the occupied West Bank, strengthens Israel's military presence, weakens the Palestinian Authority, and works to prevent the establishment of a future Palestinian state. In this context, no fundamental differences in the platforms of the central parties are expected. The current parliamentary opposition does not put forward a political project that is fundamentally different from the Likud Party's. Neither does Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid (There is a Future) Party, Benny Gantz's Official Camp, or Naftali Bennett's Yamina (he is using a temporary name of Bennett 2026), offer a political proposal that is fundamentally different from Likud's positions on the occupation.
- Centering the political dispute over the occupation and settlements on the extreme religious right's demand to annex the West Bank to Israel, as opposed to maintaining the status quo, without moving to formal annexation steps.²
- The affirmation of a broad consensus on the centrality of the security and foreign policy axes among the central parties, especially with regard to the claim that the security of the State of Israel must be maintained according to the conditions set by Israel itself, and in order to ensure the continuation of its regional hegemony.
- The emergence of the status of Palestinian Arab parties and the legitimacy of their political influence in the Israeli political system, especially with regard to the possibility of playing a big role in the formation of the next governing coalition. The central question here is whether the Israeli mainstream parties are willing to receive support from Palestinian Arab parties to form a coalition government, as happened after the 2021 elections, or whether the Israeli opposition parties will prefer, after the events of October 7, 2023, to refrain from forming a government based on the support of said parties. This support could be limited to the abstention of one or more Palestinian Arab parties from voting against granting the next government the required confidence to rule. In this regard, it should be noted that this issue is also contentious within Palestinian Arab society, and among the Palestinian Arab parties themselves, and does not have implicit consensus.
- The current opposition parties, which in 2021 formed the so-called Government of Change with the participation of a Palestinian Arab party for the first time in the history of the State of Israel, are clearly reticent today about the possibility of allying with a Palestinian Arab party to form a new coalition government, even if the party accepts the Zionist parties' conditions for participation. These parties—as both Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid have declared—confirm their commitment (so far) to form a government based solely on Zionist parties.

In the same context, Benny Gantz, a partner in the Government of Change, has recently launched a media and election campaign with the slogan "Forming a broad coalition without Ben-Gvir and without the United Arab List," in a clear reference to his rejection of the possibility of a future governing coalition based on the support of the United Arab List.³ On the other hand, former minister Gadi Eizenkot deviated from this position, declaring that a majority for a future coalition led by opposition parties can be secured through the abstention of Palestinian Arab parties from voting, without the need for direct support or actual participation in the coalition.⁴

From its side, the Likud Party and its chairman, Benjamin Netanyahu, are working to delegitimize any role for Palestinian Arab parties in forming the next governing coalition, whether through direct participation in the government or by abstaining from voting. This allows for a parliamentary majority for a coalition that the opposition parties may form after the next elections, as Netanyahu explained in his speech to the Knesset on January 20, 2026.⁵

- Deepening the rifts related to domestic affairs. It is expected that the fissures related to the status of the judiciary, the meanings of democracy in Israeli society, and the position of the ultra-Orthodox parties and the ultra-Orthodox community in the political and social systems in Israel will impact the elections. Importantly, the issue of legislating an exemption for seminary students from military service and guaranteeing government budgets for religious institutes and institutions of the ultra-Orthodox community will enhance the importance of these aspects in crystallizing voting patterns and competition between parties. In addition, other issues related directly to the events of October 7, 2023, emerged, foremost of which is that of taking responsibility for the major security failure, and the question of establishing an independent official commission of inquiry into those events.

The governing coalition has begun to prepare for the upcoming elections, and the possibility of holding them early, by accelerating the enactment of a series of laws aimed at regulating the exemption of religious seminary students from military service in response to the demands of ultra-Orthodox parties, allocating generous budgets for these parties, and restricting the powers of the judiciary. The coalition is also trying to prevent the formation of an independent official commission of inquiry into the events of October 7, 2023, by enacting a law that instead establishes a government-supervised commission.⁶ Furthermore, the coalition is seeking to amend laws and regulations related to the appointment of senior employees and board members of state enterprises, in addition to providing broad incentives and economic benefits to the electorate ahead of the elections, as part of efforts to strengthen the electoral base.⁷

Benjamin Netanyahu seems willing to wage his electoral fight around these issues, since there are no fundamental differences within the right-wing and far-right camps over most of them. With regard to the Gaza war, and despite the failures, the narrative is that

Israel fought a decisive battle against all enemies in the region and emerged victorious, and that the contours of the Middle East have changed. The struggle with the judiciary is widely supported within the right-wing base, and is a demand that unites its various components.

On the other hand, the issue of exempting Orthodox seminary students from military service is one of the most sensitive issues, especially in light of the government's efforts to pass a new law that grants this exemption an official status. However, this issue raises problems even within the right-wing camp and the extreme right itself, as part of the right's base does not fully support it.

Still, the enactment of the law puts Benjamin Netanyahu in a double electoral dilemma. Its passage could cost him losses within the right-wing base, as well as with large segments of Israeli society demanding equal treatment. On the other hand, blocking it could deepen tensions with the ultra-Orthodox parties, which have been his strategic partners in governance since 2009.

The real test for the governing coalition and the ultra-Orthodox parties remains the date of the approval of the 2026 state budget, which must occur before the end of March 2026. If the dilemma of exempting religious seminary students from military service is not resolved before then, the ruling coalition will have a serious difficulty in passing the budget law. Not passing the draft budget will automatically dissolve the Knesset. General elections will be scheduled within a period not exceeding 90 days from the end of March 2026, unless the coalition and the opposition reach an agreement on another date, provided that it does not exceed a period of between 90 and 120 days after the end of March.

Conclusion

The upcoming elections will mostly focus on domestic issues, while those related to the occupation, settlements, and control of Gaza will recede from public debate. As was the case before the outbreak of the Second Intifada, the Palestine question and the issues of occupation and settlements are no longer the focus of deep political disagreement between elites and the mainstream Israeli parties. The events of October 7, 2023 have strengthened this rightist consensus within Israeli society and among Israeli parties, in contrast to the added importance of internal contentious issues as central concerns in the electoral competition.

Regardless of the outcome of the upcoming elections and the division of seats among Israeli parties, this position paper argues that the dominance of the traditional right-wing project and rhetoric will continue after the elections, even if the current coalition loses power. Additionally, it can be said that the right's project and its political convictions toward the Palestinian issue will continue to dominate governance in Israel, even if

Benjamin Netanyahu loses the election. Thus, the expected political and ideological competition is likely to be limited to the traditional right and the extreme right, without serious alternative political projects. All of the alternatives presented do not formulate a political project that is fundamentally different from the one led by Netanyahu.

His current main rival, Naftali Bennett, hails from the heart of the religious Zionist movement, and has headed this trend in previous election rounds, founding right-wing parties, and allying with far-right forces. Yair Lapid does not present a political project that is fundamentally different from what the Likud Party proposed in the 1980s and 1990s, but rather approaches the issues like Ariel Sharon when he founded the Kadima Party in 2005. Finally, the Democrats have not challenged the basic values and assumptions that underpin the Zionist project.

Endnotes

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