

Netanyahu's Victory and Israel's Future

Written by Ian Lustick

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IAN LUSTICK, MAR 27 2015

The elections in Israel have ensured that Benjamin Netanyahu will remain as Prime Minister of Israel and that the government he heads will pursue substantively the same policies as those of its predecessor. Settlements will be expanded. The lives of Jerusalem Arabs will be embittered and endangered by intensive Judaization campaigns in Arab areas and by pressures on Arab residents to leave the city. Every two years or so a military operation in Gaza, Lebanon, or the West Bank will “cut the grass,” (i.e. destroy enough to re-immiserate Palestinian society and set back any plans to mobilize violently against Israel in the near future). Public talk of annexing area C in the West Bank, including heavily settled areas, will continue and become even more prominent. Some key demands of settlers, including construction of Jewish housing in the E1 zone between Maale Adumim and Jerusalem will be met. And Israeli foreign policy will continue to characterize the Middle East as a polarized battleground between civilization and Islamist barbarism, to stick its fingers in the eyes of European critics and the Obama administration, while also seeking effective but under-the-table alliances with anti-democratic forces in Egypt, the Arab Gulf, and elsewhere in the region. The hysterical campaign against Iranian nuclear technology and the Orwellian refusal to discuss the future of Israel's massive nuclear arsenal will also continue.

However, although the substance of Netanyahu's policies will not change the script from which government officials read will be missing certain crucial formulations—formulations that helped Israel maintain what workable relations it has had with most of the democratic world and much of the rest. To engineer the massive “return home” of alienated, but fundamentally right-wing and ultranationalist voters, Netanyahu played his own “Willie Horton” card—the trick used by the first President Bush that helped him defeat the Democrat Michael Dukakis by portraying Dukakis as soft on the black criminals that threatened “us.” Netanyahu did this with a campaign whose slogan was “It's Us or Them” and by a series of bizarre, fiercely anti-Arab and anti-peace declarations at the end of the campaign which secured his electoral triumph, but only by destroying his government's ability to hide its true intentions with regard to negotiations with the Palestinians. Not only did Netanyahu declare that while he was Premier there never would be a Palestinian state, and not only did he studiously refuse to endorse any sort of negotiating process, but he also portrayed Arabs, even Arab citizens of Israel, as the dangerous enemy of his political base. Jews he insisted, at least those committed to the “National Camp,” had to vote for him because the “Arabs were voting in droves.” Their ability to do so, he claimed, resulted not from Israeli democracy, but from a conspiracy between Israeli leftists and well-funded groups supported by the Obama administration and other untrustworthy international forces.

These well-publicized declarations will make it exceedingly difficult for Netanyahu to benefit from the ambiguity he was able to introduce into Israel's negotiating position by having declared, several years ago, that in principle he accepted a “two state solution,” (without ever defining what it meant), and by repeatedly indicating that he would be willing to make “painful concessions” to achieve it. While he almost certainly never meant any of that, it was in the interest of the United States and others to treat him as if, perhaps, he did. That enabled peace negotiations to be pursued and conducted over many months—many months during which the whole difficult and inconvenient Israel-Palestine problem could be shelved (so as not to endanger the negotiations).

Just prior to the elections, American officials indicated that, as expected, they would have another go at the peace process, suggesting that exactly how that would happen would depend on the outcome of the Israeli elections. They were counting on a Netanyahu defeat, or at least a weakened Netanyahu government, that would once again be

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willing to climb with them onto the hamster wheel of the “peace process.” But that is not what happened. Any attempt to re-launch peace negotiations based on the Road-Map, the Clinton Parameters, the Annapolis Agreement, or any other such formula imagining the eventual emergence of a Palestinian state next to Israel, will founder on Netanyahu's barefaced and explicit rejection of that prospect as at all acceptable, as well as on the policies of settlement and de facto annexation his government is poised to accelerate. This opens the door widely to Palestinian efforts to secure international condemnation of and sanctions against Israel at the International Criminal Court, the Security Council, and elsewhere. A lameduck Obama administration, already furious at Netanyahu for his collusion with its Republican enemies, will find abstention, at least, at the Security Council, an extremely tempting option, and will find it without its only real argument against Palestinian appeals against Israel under international law (i.e. such “unilateral” moves endanger peace negotiations).

Apart from the implications of Netanyahu's election tactics for US foreign policy, it is also important to note just how strongly they play into the anti-normalization campaigns that have already driven deep wedges between West Bank Palestinians and even liberal-dovish Israelis, and a growing international BDS campaign that seeks, non-violently, to isolate and delegitimize Israeli policies that support occupation or denial of democratic rights to Palestinians. When Netanyahu places the race card to win elections, and his former, and perhaps future, Foreign Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, calls for “disloyal” Arab Israelis to be beheaded, it is just that much more difficult for friends of “the Jewish state” to defend that principle against accusations of Apartheid or racism.

In the long run we may see the strong showing of the United (Arab) List as the most promising element in these elections. It won 13 seats, and although it will surely not act as a thoroughly coherent and disciplined party, it is significant that it emerged as the third largest Knesset faction. Just as no Democratic candidate could hope to win the White House without the strong backing of Hispanics and African Americans, so too, in Israel, we will not see a government capable of addressing the fateful problems the country faces until the country changes fundamentally. When Arabs increase the size of their presence in the Parliament from 13 to 20, or even more, that will force the liberal Jewish left and even the center to treat them as eligible partners in governing the state. Ultimately the choice for those Israelis will be between a state organized to discriminate against non-Jews, and an Israeli state organized to serve and respect all its citizens, equally, including sharing access to national resources, and honoring the different cultural and national traditions that animate their communities. On this choice will turn the question of whether rule of the country by right-wing, clericalist, and ultranationalist parties will last as long as the state itself.

About the author:

Ian Lustick is Professor of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania. He is interested in comparative politics, international politics, Middle Eastern politics, and agent-based, computer assisted modeling for the social sciences. He teaches courses on Middle Eastern politics, political identities and institutions, techniques of hegemonic analysis, the expansion and contraction of states, and on relationships among complexity, evolution, and politics. Dr. Lustick is a recipient of awards from the Carnegie Corporation, the National Science Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Social Sciences Research Council, and the United States Institute of Peace. Before coming to Penn, Professor Lustick taught for fifteen years at Dartmouth College and worked for one year in the Department of State. His present research focuses the politics of Jewish and non-Jewish migration into and out of Palestine/the Land of Israel, on prospects for peace between Israelis and Palestinians, on applications of agent-based modeling in the social sciences, techniques of disciplined counterfactual analysis, and the problem of modeling political violence. He is a past president of the Politics and History Section of the American Political Science Association and of the Association for Israel Studies, and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations.