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## **The Israeli Elections: Indications and Implications**

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Elections for the nineteenth Knesset were held in Israel on Tuesday, January 22, 2013. The results refute certain common assumptions among the media and the Israeli public. Based on these results, this essay will assess various possibilities for forming the next Israeli government and their implications for Israel's national security policy.

### **Voter Turnout**

The voter turnout was 68 percent, about 3 percent more than in the elections of 2009 and the largest turnout since 1999. However, the true turnout was even higher. Voter turnout is calculated as the percentage of those who actually voted – 3,834,136 people – out of the number of eligible voters, 5,656,705. Yet according to the estimate of the Central Bureau of Statistics, the voter registry, which is based on the population registry, includes between 400,000 and 500,000 people who live permanently abroad or at least have lived abroad for a long time and do not currently reside in Israel. These people are not physically in Israel on Election Day and thus cannot vote. Accordingly, the voter turnout among those who could physically vote is 5 percent higher than what was reported, that is, 73 percent.

Voter turnout among Israeli Arabs was 56 percent, which was also higher than in the 2009 elections, although it is still significantly lower than among Israeli Jews. On the basis of data aggregation, voter turnout among Jews, i.e., not counting those who are abroad, was approximately 75 percent, which is among the highest in the world, and much higher than in the United States and most European countries. This fact refutes the assumption that a large portion of the Israeli public is alienated and apathetic. Although some commentators labeled this election the most boring election in many years, nearly three of every four Israelis came to exercise their right to vote. This is a tribute to Israeli citizens and Israeli democracy.

### **Distribution of Seats**

The most significant result of the election, in terms of its impact on future Israeli policy, is the decline in power of the bloc of right wing parties (which includes the ultra-Orthodox parties), especially the significant drop in the strength of Likud Beitenu, and

the meteoric rise of Yesh Atid, headed by Yair Lapid. In the 2009 elections, the right wing bloc received sixty-five seats and enjoyed a clear majority in the Knesset. In last week's elections, the right wing bloc – Likud Beitenu, HaBayit HeYehudi (Jewish Home), Shas, and United Torah Judaism – won sixty-one seats, only a one-seat majority in the Knesset. Likud Beitenu itself lost about a quarter of its strength, and went from forty-two Knesset members to thirty-one: seven seats went to right wing bloc partners (five to HaBayit HeYehudi and two to United Torah Judaism), and another four seats to parties outside the right wing bloc. This slight decline in the strength of the right wing parties refutes the widely held assumption that there is a swing to the right in Israeli public opinion. Yesh Atid, a party that did not exist until a year before the elections, won nineteen seats, an achievement unprecedented in Israeli history.

These numbers have several implications. First, the ability of the right wing bloc to promote its political agenda – continued development of settlements throughout Judea and Samaria; maintaining and legalizing all unauthorized outposts; and for the more extreme among them, preventing the establishment of a Palestinian state – is very limited; in certain areas, such as restricting the far reaching authority of the Supreme Court or limiting the ability of human rights organizations to function, it does not exist. Second, the position of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been weakened: he is perceived as having led his party to a stinging loss in the elections and as responsible for a serious reduction in the number of Likud MKs. This is likely to harm Netanyahu's freedom of action in Cabinet appointments and in the future, in making diplomatic moves, especially in light of the extreme right wing makeup of the Likud Knesset faction.

An additional issue is the great weight Yesh Atid will have in future diplomatic and security decisions. To be sure, Yesh Atid's positions on diplomacy and security issues, led by the peace process with the Palestinians and Iran, are not fully clear. Yesh Atid, like Yair Lapid, focused on domestic issues throughout the election campaign, foremost among them an equal distribution of the burden and improving the situation of the middle class, and barely discussed political issues. Among the nineteen MKs from this party are those who are to the left of center and those who are to the right. However, the party's – and Lapid's – declared position supports two states for two peoples and a rapid renewal of the political process.

A final point: the right wing bloc includes two factions formed by combining two separate parties: Likud Beitenu, which is composed of Likud (twenty seats) and Yisrael Beitenu (eleven seats); and HaBayit HaYehudi, comprising HaBayit HaYehudi (eight seats) and Tekuma (previously part of the National Union, four seats). There is always the possibility that in the future, there will be a split in these factions. Such a split requires approval by one third of the faction members, and each of the two smaller parties indeed has the required one third. The first hint of such a possibility came the day after

the elections, when Avidgor Lieberman held a separate meeting of Yisrael Beitenu MKs; some even saw this as a threatening message to Netanyahu. Lieberman made sure to declare that the future government must deal with domestic issues and not political issues that are a source of disagreement. This can be seen as a warning of sorts by Lieberman against possible political moves by the Prime Minister.

### **Forming the Coalition**

The first stage in forming a coalition is the decision by the President to ask a Knesset member to form the government. Lapid's statement that he does not intend to join a bloc that will prevent Netanyahu from forming a government assures Netanyahu that at least sixty-two MKs (Likud Beitenu, Yesh Atid, and HaBayit Hayehudi) will recommend to the President that Netanyahu be given the job of forming the government. Netanyahu will have forty-two days to present his new government to the Knesset.

In the current electoral constellation, forming a coalition is difficult. One possibility is a coalition of sixty-one, comprising right wing parties only. Although a highly unlikely possibility and clearly unpalatable to Prime Minister Netanyahu, it cannot be ruled out entirely. Such a government would be paralyzed on all political issues. A second possibility is a national unity government that would include most of the parties, other than Meretz and the Arab parties on the left and United Torah Judaism on the right, and would have ninety-six seats. This is also unlikely, and it is very doubtful that such a large government could work effectively and endure over time.

The most likely possibility is a coalition of Likud Beitenu, Yesh Atid, Hatnuah (led by Tzipi Livni), and Kadima (led by Shaul Mofaz), with the addition of Shas (sixty-nine seats in total), forming a government that could resume the peace process; or with the addition of HaBayit HaYehudi (seventy seats altogether), forming a government that could work toward a more equal distribution of the burden and even make progress – at least to a certain extent – on the peace process; or both latter parties, forming a coalition of eighty-one seats. This last possibility is presumably the most desirable for Netanyahu and would in fact allow him the greatest freedom of action on political and security issues and on social and economic matters.

