

Israeli Elections: Rearranging Deck Chairs on the Titanic

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Israel's second election in the past five months has [led to yet another political stalemate](#). As [occurred in April](#), the two main political parties, the far-right Likud and centre-right Blue and White, fought to a virtual tie.

The political kingmaker today, as he was in April, is Avigdor Lieberman of Yisrael Beiteinu. In the last election, he refused to offer his party's seats to a Likud-led coalition headed by his once-patron and now arch-rival, Benjamin Netanyahu. This is what led to the current round of voting.

Though it is hard to predict what Lieberman will do, he is holding out for a secular "unity government" consisting of Likud and Blue and White. His main aims are to keep the [Orthodox parties](#) out of the ruling coalition and pass a military draft law to compel currently-exempt Orthodox youth to join the army.

Path to a coalition

This plan is vehemently opposed by the ultra-Orthodox, who maintain that studying the Torah is the only suitable vocation for men. They view joining the army as a grave desecration of their divine obligations. In the past, they have closed down major highways and rioted during protests against this law.

There is another path to a centre-right coalition led by Blue and White that would exclude Likud. The Palestinian Joint List has offered, for the first time in Israeli history, [to join](#) such a government.

Given that it is the third-largest party in the Knesset, increasing its representation in this election to [13 seats](#), in any other democratic legislature it would be a natural constituent for such a governing coalition.

But Israel is not a secular democracy. It is rather an ethnocracy, in which the rights of Palestinian citizens are subordinated to those of Jews. No ruling Israeli coalition [has ever](#) included Palestinian parties.

This is a prospect that Lieberman, who is fanatically anti-Palestinian, would never countenance. As such, it's highly unlikely that these seats will be placed at the service of a centrist coalition.

This, of course, is one of the major tragedies of Israeli political discourse. The system

refuses to confer equal rights on its Palestinian citizens. This, in turn, only confirms that the conception of Israel as a Jewish state is in irredeemable conflict with Israel as a democratic state.

Clearly many, if not most, Israeli Jews are willing to shed the notion of a democratic Israel to preserve their superior rights.

Hollow rationale

Returning to Lieberman's grand coalition: it would be a weird amalgam of parties holding views from the centre-right to the far-right. Most of the centre-left parties, such as Labor and the Democratic Union, would either boycott it or be dubbed too left-wing for comfort.

These two large party blocs would cohabit in extreme discomfort. They have been campaigning against each other for months, slinging vile, racist smears.

Lieberman's own [rationale for such a government](#) rings exceedingly hollow:

"I say to all citizens, our security and economy are in an emergency situation. Therefore, the state must have a broad national, liberal government, and not one which fights for survival from one week to the next and from one no-confidence vote to the next."

Neither Israel's security nor its economy face any emergency, nor would such a government address the nation's problems very differently than the current far-right, Likud-led government.

The main difference will be that Lieberman will have played an instrumental role in forging this ruling coalition, and will score a plumb ministerial assignment as foreign or defence minister. In other words, this is a vanity project boosting his own political power.

Whatever the outcome, and barring any miraculous rabbits pulled from a hat, Netanyahu's career as prime minister seems to be at an end. The price for Blue and White entering into a coalition with Likud will be dropping him as its leader. Gantz has said that he will not serve with a coalition partner facing major corruption charges.

Though Israeli politicians have been known to make such pledges before and break them when faced with the prospect of securing power, Gantz likely will not compromise on this point – and Likud's loyalty to Netanyahu under such circumstances will be exceedingly weak.

The party would much rather remain in power than go to a third election or see themselves on the outside of the next government. Ditching their long-time leader will not be a heavy lift.

Palestinians lose again

Netanyahu is so desperate to retain power that he [hatched a plan to invade Gaza](#). Such a military operation would have conveniently entailed delaying the election. There's nothing like a good war to rally voters to a politician's side, but the Israeli army chief of staff and the attorney general both nipped the stratagem in the bud.

Whoever wins, Palestinians – both Israeli citizens and those in occupied Palestine – [will lose](#). They are an afterthought, at best.

No party during this election offered any serious thought to the conflict with Palestinians; it is simply not on the Israeli political agenda.

For more than four decades, the ruling Israeli far-right has co-opted the debate and formed a national consensus that rejects a single-state or two-state solution. Yes, the politicians have mouthed fealty to two states, but they then refused to sign any agreement with the Palestinians that offered them even half a loaf.

Israelis are happy with the status quo since it offers them all of the benefits and none of the costs of maintaining the occupation of millions of Palestinians.

Regardless of who wins, regardless of the composition of a new government, this election is a tragedy. It breaks no new ground in resolving Israel's greatest, most unsolvable problem. This means the wars will continue, the violence will continue, the hatred will continue unabated.

As I [wrote in my post-mortem of the 2015 election](#), the results consist of rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic, instead of seeing clearly the iceberg lying straight ahead.

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Richard Silverstein writes the Tikun Olam blog, devoted to exposing the excesses of the Israeli national security state. His work has appeared in Haaretz, the Forward, the Seattle Times and the Los Angeles Times.

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