



The elections are about Israel's future

Unlike in Europe and the U.S., the upcoming elections in Israel are not about the left or the right. They are about the very nature of the Jewish state.

By Sacha Wigdorovits

On Tuesday, October 27, Israel will elect its new parliament, the Knesset, and thereby also decide on its future government. The fact that over 50,000 Israelis living abroad are returning to their homeland for Election Day (the only way they can vote) underscores the significance of these first parliamentary elections since the massacre of October 7, 2023.

From Democracy to Autocracy and the Brain Drain

For even more so than in past elections, the future of the Jewish state is at stake this time: Should it remain a modern, multicultural democracy founded on the principles of the rule of law? Or should Israel evolve into a country dominated by far-right ideology, violence, and theocratic thinking?

The latter would be disastrous not only politically, but also socially and economically. For it would lead to the emigration of more and more of those young, well-educated Israelis who, over the past decades, have turned the country into a superpower in information and defense technology, thereby bringing it prosperity. Last year alone, more than 90,000 Israelis—mostly young people—left the country, while only 25,000 immigrated.

If the current governing coalition remains in power, this brain drain will continue. This is because the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu—who himself belongs to the center-right Likud party—is dominated by far-right and ultra-Orthodox parties. During the legislative term now drawing to a close, these parties have prioritized not the country's interests, but their own and those of their constituencies.

Mandatory military service for the ultra-Orthodox as a central campaign issue

Initially, the government attempted to push through a judicial reform designed to strip the Supreme Court of its power in its favor. The Supreme Court plays a particularly important role in Israel as a check on the government and parliament because, unlike Switzerland, for example, the Jewish state does not have a unified, codified constitution.



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The Supreme Court is a thorn in the side of the current governing coalition primarily because it ruled in 2024 that, in principle, young Haredim—that is, young ultra-Orthodox Jews—are also subject to mandatory military service. In the past, they had been exempt from military or civilian service. The government subsequently enacted a law to that effect. However, the law is structured in such a way that young ultra-Orthodox Jews have, in effect, nothing to fear if they refuse to serve—which most of them continue to do.

The Haredim, whose lives are devoted primarily to the study of religious texts, make up about 14 percent of the population. However, they constitute an important voting bloc for the current government and therefore enjoy numerous privileges. These include exemption from mandatory military service as well as extensive government subsidies.

Based on the same political calculation, the government is not taking action—or is doing so only very hesitantly—against the far-right Jewish settlers in the West Bank who are terrorizing their Arab neighbors. After all, the settlers are also an important voter bloc. The opposition has already announced that it will put an end to this settler violence using police and military means if it wins the election.

More important than settler violence in the election campaign, however, is the one-sided favoritism toward the ultra-Orthodox at the expense of the large secular majority and the religious Zionists, who also perform military service. The parties united in the opposition bloc have announced that they will put an end to the privileges enjoyed by the Haredim if they come to power.

The opposition also wants to limit the privileges and power of prime ministers. In the future, their term of office would be limited to two legislative terms—that is, a maximum of eight years. Furthermore, no one facing criminal charges would be allowed to serve as prime minister. Benjamin Netanyahu is doing just that: He remains in office despite a corruption trial that has been ongoing for years.

### October 7 as the second key issue

The second key campaign issue, alongside the privileges enjoyed by the ultra-Orthodox, is the Hamas massacre of October 7, 2023. Here, too, should it win the election, the opposition would implement a drastic change in policy compared to the current government. It intends to have a so-called “State Commission,” appointed by the Supreme Court, investigate how this surprise attack—with its



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horrific consequences—could have occurred without countermeasures being ordered in a timely manner.

Such an independent commission of inquiry addressed similar issues following the 1973 Yom Kippur War, which Israel nearly lost. Its investigation ultimately contributed to the resignation of then-Prime Minister Golda Meir.

That is exactly what Benjamin Netanyahu fears. Recently, there have been increasing indications that, in the run-up to October 7, 2023, he did not take warnings about an impending large-scale operation by the terrorist organization Hamas seriously. That is why the current government has consistently refused to allow an independent “State Commission” to investigate these failures. If Netanyahu loses the election, he will no longer be able to prevent this.

Even without an independent investigation, many Israelis are already convinced that Netanyahu bears shared responsibility for the events of October 7. This is because his government neglected to secure the border with the Gaza Strip in favor of protecting settlers in the West Bank who are politically aligned with it. This accusation is particularly damaging to the prime minister because he likes to portray himself as the sole guarantor of the Jewish state's security.

### Security “hawks” on both sides

In the current election campaign, this claim fails to convince, both in light of the failure on October 7 and for personnel reasons. For on the opposition side, he faces two proven security experts: Gadi Eisenkot, the leader of the Yashar party, and Yair Golan, the chairman of the Democrats party: Eisenkot is a former Chief of Staff of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), and Golan was his Deputy Chief of Staff.

Above all, however, security policy does not serve as a distinguishing issue for Netanyahu in the election campaign because there is broad agreement between the government and the opposition on key security matters. On both sides, security “hawks” lead the parties. Both camps reject the creation of an independent Palestinian state—at least for the foreseeable future—for security reasons. And with the exception of Yair Golan, no opposition leader is willing to include an Arab party in the government, as was already the case in 2021.

Arab parties will decide the election's outcome

For the current far-right government, a coalition with an Arab party is out of the question anyway. Whether the opposition will stick to its categorical “no” after the elections, however, is questionable.

While Eisenkot's Yashar party is likely to emerge as the strongest political force in the Knesset, nearly all election polls predict a stalemate between the governing coalition and the opposition in the traditionally highly fragmented Israeli parliament on October 27. According to these polls, neither camp would reach the 61 seats out of a total of 120 required for a majority. Both blocs are predicted to win between 50 and 51 seats each.

To secure a majority and unseat the current government, the opposition therefore needs the support of the Arab parties, which are running on a joint three-party list and an independent list. This is because election polls predict that the four parties, which represent the two million Arab-Israeli voters, will win a total of 13 to 15 seats in the Knesset. This would be enough to help the opposition secure a majority or to support a minority government formed by the opposition during the next legislative term.

### Further rounds of voting likely

Whether this will be the case remains uncertain at least until October 27, but likely even longer. For although the stakes are high for Israel, given the deadlock now expected, there could still be two or three more rounds of voting in the coming months before the new government is formed.

Only then will we know whether Israel will remain a modern, strong democracy based on the rule of law—or whether the Jewish state will evolve into an autocratic and theocratic country, like its Arab neighbors.

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