

What Has Been Is What Will Be: The 2015 Israeli Elections and the State of Turkish-Israeli Relations

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ABSTRACT *The most notable aspect of the 2015 Israeli parliamentary elections was that the incumbent Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has entered his fourth (and third consecutive) term in office as Prime Minister. His views, his right-wing coalition, and his hesitant nature as a decision maker make it unlikely that he will push for serious peace negotiations with the Palestinians. As the quality of Turkish-Israeli relations is very much linked to the state of Israeli-Palestinian relations, a true improvement (beyond just normalization, which in itself is difficult to achieve) in Turkish-Israeli relations remains unlikely.*

The 2015 parliamentary elections were framed as a choice between being “for Bibi” (incumbent Prime Minister and head of the Likud Party Benjamin Netanyahu) or “against him.” Many voters in the end chose the Likud Party because Netanyahu was perceived as more capable of dealing with security issues (i.e., Iran, Hamas, ISIS) than his main opponent from the Zionist Union party, Issac Herzog.¹ The Likud Party was clearly the big winner of the election, receiving 30 mandates (out of 120), and essentially increasing the mandates it received by 50 percent over previous elections. The Labor Party in its current form of the Zionist Union (after uniting with

former Justice Minister Tzipi Livni’s party, Hatnua) increased its strength from 15 mandates to 24.² With almost no movement of votes between Right and Left, the main transformations occurred inside the blocks. While the Likud Party managed to win many votes from the extreme right (Habayit Hayehudi), the Zionist Union failed to weaken the center-left party, Yesh Atid. Another notable development was the formation of a united party among the Arab minority within Israel (Israeli-Palestinians), which received 13 mandates, making it the third largest party in parliament.

Two main trends emerged in the commentaries after the elections in

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analyzing the results. One highlighted Netanyahu’s clever tactics and the Zionist Union’s mistakes. The other highlighted the inevitability of the results given the drift in Israeli public opinion toward the right. Ben Meir argues, however, that in fact the right-wing block lost mandates compared to previous elections.³ A big question is how one defines the Israeli center (which includes Yesh Atid and Kulanu): on the one hand, these parties clearly support, on the whole, the two-state solution; on the other hand, they support this solution in a form that is highly unlikely to be enough for the Palestinian side. Since the Kulanu party, as was anticipated before the election, is critical in forming Netanyahu’s new government, the question of what exactly one can expect from the Israeli center is an important one. One caveat, however, is that Kulanu’s intense focus on domestic issues (especially their priority of lowering housing prices) means that it is less likely to press Netanyahu on foreign affairs issues (unless, perhaps, Israel faces mounting international pressure due to Netanyahu’s right-wing coalition).

Much rests on Netanyahu himself. Ehud Barak, as former Prime Minis-

ter and former Defense Minister under Netanyahu, claims that Netanyahu has over the years “developed a mind-set at once pessimistic, passive and anxious... and on the Palestinian question he grossly ignores the slippery slope awaiting Israel in the form of a one-state solution.”⁴ In light of Netanyahu’s views and his hesitance in taking dramatic measures, as well as his right-wing coalition, it seems unlikely he will initiate major steps in line with the two-state solution. In fact, just prior to the elections (in a move that is seen to have brought him additional votes from the extreme right), he told a journalist, in response to questioning, that if he were re-elected, no Palestinian state would be established.⁵ Two days after the elections, Netanyahu backtracked and stated, “I want a sustainable, peaceful two-state solution. But for that, circumstances have to change.”⁶

If Netanyahu does proceed in the unlikely direction of seriously moving ahead in the peace process, he will not be the first Israeli right-winger to do so: it was Likud Prime Minister Menachem Begin who signed the peace treaty with Egypt; Likud Prime Minister Ariel Sharon who disengaged from the Gaza Strip (and later formed the Kadima Party); and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert (formerly a Likud Member but at the time in Kadima) who, according to various accounts, offered the Palestinians more than any Israeli leader had offered them before.⁷ However, if Netanyahu wants to proceed with the Palestinians, he clearly will have to form a national unity government

with the Zionist Union party, something that currently seems unlikely.

The raising of the election threshold from 2 percent to 3.25, initiated by Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman in order to reduce the representation of Arab parties, actually caused them to unite.⁸ The question of whether the Joint (Arab) List will manage to maintain its unity is an interesting one, as is the question of what direction this party will develop. Will it focus on developments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, will it concentrate on improving the minority rights of the Arabs in Israel, or will it promote an alternative agenda of a “state for all its citizens” (challenging the existing narrative of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people)? Importantly, public opinion polls show that regardless of whether Israel reaches a settlement with the Palestinians, most Arab-Israelis would like to remain Israeli citizens.⁹ It should be stressed that, as time goes by, the two-state solution seems to be losing its feasibility. As a result, the direction in which the Joint (Arab) List develops and how the rest of the Israeli political system reacts to it may provide clues to what lies ahead regarding a possible one-state solution.

Turkey-Israel Relations

Relations with Turkey were not an issue during the electoral campaign in Israel.¹⁰ The only times the subject did come up were, first, during the “war of words” initiated by the Turkish side after the “Charlie Hebdo” attack and

Netanyahu’s attendance in the Paris march,¹¹ and, second, when Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu refused to attend the Munich Security Conference in February 2015 because Israeli Intelligence Minister Yuval Steinitz was also attending. Following the latter incident, Foreign Minister Lieberman stated that Netanyahu’s 2013 apology to Turkey over the Gaza flotilla deaths of 2010 had been a great mistake and criticized both Ankara and Netanyahu.¹² Still, it seems that most Israeli Jews are, on the one hand, resentful of Turkey’s harsh critique of Israel, and, on the other hand, pragmatic and understanding of the need to avoid further damaging relations.¹³ Hence, relations with Turkey are not really a divisive issue between political parties, although individual politicians have in the past objected to the rapprochement process with Turkey, such as Lieberman (above-mentioned) and Moshe Ya’alon, mainly while he served as Minister of Strategic Affairs, but also later as Defense Minister.¹⁴

Netanyahu’s apology to then Prime Minister and now President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan over the *Mavi Marmara* affair, made in a telephone call in March 2013 while U.S. President Barack Obama was visiting Israel, was expected to lead to a swift normalization in relations between Turkey and Israel. Although this did not materialize, the atmosphere between the two states did somewhat improve, and in late April 2014, Erdoğan, in a televised interview with an American Media outlet, stated that an agreement on normalizing relations



A Jewish man casts his ballot at a polling station in Bnei Brak, near the city of Tel Aviv, on March 17, 2015.

AFP PHOTO / GIL COHEN-MAGEN

between the two states was expected in the coming weeks.¹⁵ While the Turkish side claims, in effect, that the ball is in Netanyahu's court, the Israeli side worries that even if a deal is reached with Turkey, Erdoğan will return to his harsh rhetoric against Israel at the first sign of new friction between Israelis and Palestinians. Operation "Protective Edge" in Gaza in July-August 2014 proved the precariousness of relations between the states. Erdoğan's reactions to the operation were extremely harsh, and included a claim, among his many statements, that Israel had "surpassed Hitler in barbarism."¹⁶ Erdoğan also stated bluntly that as long as he is in power, relations will not improve.¹⁷ Following this operation, Israel broke with its policy of containment and began to attack Turkey rhetorically and diplomatically.¹⁸ Specifically, Is-

rael highlighted the involvement of Hamas headquarters in Istanbul in initiating terror attacks in the West Bank (and, according to Israel, Turkish cooperation with these terrorist elements).¹⁹

Two issues are likely to bring the points of contention between Turkey and Israel back onto the stage: Netanyahu's new government is not likely to resume talks with the Palestinians, and a new round of confrontation between Israel and Hamas seems only a matter of time. Still, there seems to be some convergence between Turkey and Israel over the issue of Gaza's reconstruction following "Protective Edge". Israel understands that not proceeding with reconstruction increases the likelihood that a new round of confrontation with Hamas will soon occur. Turkish aid is overall

probably viewed more favorably than that of certain other states, as it not only involves sending material assis-

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tance, which may be used by Hamas to strengthen its military wing, but also assistance in the form of development projects such as water wells, or the hospital currently being built by the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) in Gaza.

Other developments to consider are security cooperation between Egypt and Israel, and talks between Egypt, Israel, Greece, and the Republic of Cyprus over energy issues. This cooperation is viewed in a negative light by Turkey, given the lack of settlement of the Cyprus issue and the current tensions between Turkey and Egypt. This marks a sharp contrast to past expectations that the gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean would bring Turkey and Israel back together. In fact, during operation "Protective Edge", Turkish Energy Minister Taner Yıldız announced that talks between Turkey and Israel

on the option of natural gas exports from Israel to and through Turkey were frozen for the time being.²⁰

The area that has seen the most (and at times the only) positive developments recently in Turkish-Israeli relations is the economy. Both countries benefit from the continuing rise of bilateral trade, which reached over \$5.5 Billion dollars in 2014 (and has more than doubled since 2009).²¹ While we are not likely to soon see the return of major tourist flows from Israel to Turkey, the Turkish Airlines Tel Aviv-Istanbul route (mainly a transit route) remains very busy and profitable, and an interesting trend can be seen in the growing number of Turkish tourists traveling to Israel: in 2014, 23,000 tourists from Turkey came to Israel (compared to 15,000 in 2010).²² Another area that might see an improvement in relations is the growing interest in Israel's start-up experience.²³ In Turkey's attempts to break away from the middle income trap, Israeli experience and expertise can be used as a bridge. Another area with potential for more cooperation is in the field of exploring the Ottoman heritage. In this respect, it is discouraging that after the Turkish government's considerable investment in restoring the Saraya Building in Jaffa in order for it to become a Turkish cultural center, it remains closed due to the strained relations between the two states.

The public image within each state of the other country has been so badly damaged in recent years that, for example, in contrast to the wide cover-

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age of Erdoğan's negative statements about Israel, little Israeli media attention was paid to the first commemoration of the International Holocaust Remembrance day in Ankara in January 2015 or the presence of Turkish Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu at the ceremony in the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. There was also scant coverage of the first official state-level commemoration in Turkey of the Struma incident,²⁴ or of the opening ceremony of the Edirne synagogue restoration (in which the Turkish government invested \$1 million).²⁵

Conclusions

The most important aspect of the 2015 elections in Israel in respect to Turkish-Israeli relations is the fact that Netanyahu will remain Israel's Prime Minister. Although Netanyahu was, in the past, the one who apologized to Turkey, he also felt that the price he paid for this apology, in terms of his public image, was not reciprocated. Hence, there is great mistrust, and there is a sense that as long as Erdoğan remains in power, attempts to improve relations are pointless.

A major breakthrough with the Palestinians seems unlikely under Netanyahu's new right-wing coalition government. And the fact that the quality of Turkey-Israel relations is very much related to the state of affairs between Israel and the Palestinians (and in recent years especially to the situation in Gaza) casts a major shadow on bilateral relations. Still, the likelihood of increased international pressure on Israel (which may make Turkey's excessive criticism of Israel somewhat redundant) and the potential success of attempts to reach a long-term ceasefire between Israel and Hamas²⁶ might make the issue of Gaza a less thorny one than before between Turkey and Israel.

The Palestinian issue notwithstanding, as the volatility of the Middle East seems to be only increasing in recent years, Turkey and Israel, as regional powers, should keep lines of communication open with each other. Both states will gain little and are set to lose much if the crisis between them deteriorates further. Turkey has lost some of its regional clout because it does not have open channels with several Middle East capitals, and Israel already has enough rivals in the region. Still, the fact that in recent years there have been no major changes in the leaders of either country makes achieving this type of cooperation difficult. ■

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