

NETANYAHU'S MASTERFUL GASLIGHTING

By Allison Hodgkins



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu smiles upon his arrival to a weekly cabinet meeting in Jerusalem, April 14, 2019. Ronen Zvulun/Reuters

Israelis went to the polls on April 9, 2019, and reelected Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin “Bibi” Netanyahu to an unprecedented fifth term in office. And no one, repeat no one, should have been surprised. Despite running under a cloud of criminal indictments, and in the face of stiff challengers from the left and right, the election results confirm that Netanyahu is the master of Israeli politics. Not only did the Likud party win the largest number of seats, and the right-wing majority in the Knesset, even the genuine surprises in the outcome—such as the eclipse of the “New Right”—ultimately worked in his favor.

The voters heeled to his calls, came home to Likud, and gave Netanyahu the number of seats and combination of parties he will need to keep himself out of prison and secure his legacy as Israel’s longest-serving prime minister. And while the balance between the small right-wing parties and the opposition will also enhance Netanyahu’s ability to navigate the rollout of the Donald Trump administration’s much-anticipated peace plan, there is little risk of the deal of the century actually coming to fruition. More likely, the outcome of the elections will be more of the same: a relentless consolidation of the status quo. No war—but no peace—a greater Israel with

expanded yet undefined borders, more Jewish than democratic, and primed to deter its adversaries in perpetuity.

It is understandable why so many thought this was going to be a close election. Netanyahu was facing the toughest electoral landscape since, well, the last time he defied expectations and prognostications to pull off a narrow, but sufficient, victory. In 2015 he was facing a unified center-left challenge, led by the Zionist Union, which brought the respected former Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni's party into a partnership with Labor. This time, his opponent was the popular former Israeli Defense Forces chief of staff Benjamin "Benny" Gantz, who merged his no-nonsense pragmatism and unimpeachable military credentials with veteran centrist Yair Lapid's sizable "Yesh Atid" party. However, unlike the 2015 elections, pre-election polls never showed the center-left block gaining a majority in the 120-seat Knesset outside the margin of error.

Instead, fifteen weeks of pre-election polls reliably confirmed the Israeli Jewish electorate's rightward shift over the last two decades. Even when Likud was trailing Gantz's Blue and White party by ten seats, pre-election polls continued to show a healthy majority for the right-wing/ultra-orthodox block from which Netanyahu has drawn his last four governing coalitions. Younger voters, who favor the right by a margin of six to one, were seen flocking to Moshe Feiglin's upstart "Identity" party, whose platform of third-temple messianism, libertarian

economics, and the legalization of marijuana was predicted to win between four and six seats.

Conversely, the polls also forecast the utter decimation of the Labor party, and miserable results for the traditional Zionist and non-Zionist left, which won less than half the forty-two seats they gained in 2015, and seven short of the minimum needed to give Gantz the barest of governing majorities. In other words, the Blue and White party's final take of thirty-five seats was fueled by left-wing voters so desperate to elect anyone other than Netanyahu that they cannibalized their own flagship party.

Netanyahu, of course, is a rabid consumer of polls—according to some reports receiving hourly updates. Aware the right had long secured an overall majority, in this election cycle he devoted his eleventh hour race-baiting to bringing right-wing voters back to Likud. His pledge to annex "parts" of the West Bank, his public disappointment with Likud voters who might be risking the future of the country by spending election day at the beach, and his hidden camera stunt—in which he affirmed the Likud party underwrote a scheme to "keep the elections kosher" by deploying Likud activists with bodycams to spy on Arab voters, were all a drive to re-establish his party as the unquestioned standard bearer of the right.

He even used Blue and White's lead to his cynical advantage. Standing over a plate of simmering eggs, he assured voters that he not only knew how to

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cook, but what Gantz was cooking—a plot to bring radical leftists and Arabs into the government. Only a vote for Likud had the heft to stop this treasonous possibility, explained Bibi. And at the end of the day, his base, a plurality of the Israeli electorate, obliged him. Likud won thirty-five seats—the largest party in the Knesset, and the biggest win for Likud in Netanyahu’s tenure.

However, it is the surprises on the far right that truly demonstrate the prime minister’s prowess at manipulating the electorate. First, both ultra-orthodox parties won two or three seats more than expected, securing third and fourth places in the Knesset with a total of sixteen seats. This wholly unexpected windfall was already pledged to Netanyahu by the party sages who see the stridently secularist Yair Lapid as an existential threat to their monopoly on religious affairs, the budgets that underwrite ultra-orthodox schools, and the draft exemptions for their students. In addition, Netanyahu’s efforts to help graft the crypto-Kahanist “Jewish Power” party onto the revenants of the Jewish Home party, which had been left to wither on the vine when right-wing power duo Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked struck out on their own, drained votes away from their insurgent, New Right Party (NR). The result of Netanyahu’s moves to galvanize the nationalist vote was that Bennett’s and Shaked’s NR was wiped out in the polls with less than a percentage point.

Their fate now serves as an object lesson

for the surviving right-wing parties on the perils of crossing Netanyahu or presuming to act as his equal. While Avigdor Lieberman of Yisrael Beiteinu and Aryeh Deri of Shas are squaring off over drafting Yeshiva students, neither really wants to risk the prospect of new elections. The latter just gained its best showing in a decade and the former barely squeaked over the 3.25 percent threshold he instituted in 2015 to keep the smaller, non-Zionist Arab parties out of the Knesset altogether.

Despite their bluster, they know, and Netanyahu knows they know, it is better to be in the government than wasting away in the opposition. Ultimately, Shas, Yisrael Beiteinu, and the Union of Right Wing Parties (URWP) will accept Netanyahu’s conditions, which will trade the choice of plum ministries for guaranteed support of a bill that grants him immunity from prosecution and patience on West Bank annexation. Lieberman will most likely content himself with another shot at the defense ministry, and in an obvious, final swipe at Bennett and Shaked, URWP leaders Bezalel Smotrich and Rafi Peretz will likely end up with the education and justice ministries (Bennett is presently minister of education and Shaked is the present minister of justice).

Locking in these four parties will give Netanyahu the magic sixty-one-seat majority in the Knesset. Nevertheless, the prime minister will still likely reach out to his current finance minister,

“LIKUD WON THIRTY-FIVE SEATS—THE LARGEST PARTY IN THE KNESSET, AND THE BIGGEST WIN FOR LIKUD IN NETANYAHU’S TENURE.”

Moshe Kahlon, who is reportedly the highest-ranking government official least comfortable with Netanyahu's efforts to evade prosecution. Although Netanyahu does not need the four seats of Kahlon's Kulanu Party, these final parliamentary seats will add some cushion to his majority, and a patina of moderation to an otherwise firmly ultra-orthodox and ultra-nationalist coalition.

With or without Kulanu, there remains speculation that Donald Trump's much-vaunted and long-awaited peace plan will unravel Netanyahu's masterplan. The URWP has already stated it will oppose any peace plan that includes a whiff of territorial compromise—even if that means bringing down the government. But here, the risk of being blamed for forcing Netanyahu into a seventy-seat unity government with Gantz will temper even those with the most annexationist instincts.

Like in 2014, when U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry was mounting a Sisyphean push for a final status agreement, URWP leaders will issue objections to the hint of territorial compromise. Meanwhile, rumors of coalition talks between Netanyahu and Gantz—most likely to be leaked by Netanyahu himself—will give Netanyahu the opportunity to appear statesmanlike as he awaits the predictable Palestinian rejection. The fact that all indications say the coming Trump proposal will have nothing even remotely close to an acceptable starting point for negotiations—let alone an actual

agreement—will not prevent Netanyahu from reprising his well-practiced “there is no partner” refrain.

With the hassle of peace in the past, Bibi will be free to focus on his efforts to tar his political opponents, the media, and the Israeli criminal justice system as a leftist cabal. He will also be able to concentrate on the gradual but inexorable consolidation of the political and territorial status quo in the Palestinian territories. Campaign promises of annexation notwithstanding, Netanyahu has always eschewed grand proclamations or sweeping gestures in favor of incremental measures that stay under the radar, yet achieve the same long-term effect.

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With the threat of Iran to keep the larger Arab states in check and another two more years in the Trump administration, the prime minister does not need to worry about regional or international pressure to resume negotiations, or anything more than nominal objections should he demolish a village, authorize new construction, or annex the occasional block of settlements, especially if such moves are taken as a “Zionist response” to an act of terrorism, however small or inconsequential. The only wrinkle in this master plan is whether after more than a decade of empty gestures and vague commitments alongside creeping annexation, the world will finally recognize Netanyahu's talk of peace is little more than masterful gaslighting.