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Israel Office

## Israel Elections 2019 Update

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With no party succeeding in forming a government following the elections that took place in Israel in April, 2019, a brand new election will now take place next week, on September 17.

JFNA is pleased to present the following backgrounder summarizing what has occurred, and what may happen in the coming weeks and months.

JFNA has also prepared a background briefing on why a second round of elections are taking place – which can be seen [here](#), as well as a paper on [how Israeli elections work](#).

### **Elections: Round Two**

Perhaps the most crucial take away from the backgrounder papers (linked above) is that in practice, Israeli elections have two “stages.” The first - the actual elections - occurs when the population elects the 120-members of Israel’s parliament, the Knesset. Those are the *national elections*, but once the results of these elections are known, we don’t always have a clear picture of who will lead the country. This only occurs during what we can call a “second stage” when a potential prime minister seeks to form a governing majority coalition of at least 61, from among those 120 newly elected MKs (represented through their parties).

### **September 2019’s theme: Mergers**

In the months that have passed since second elections were called, there has been little, if any, debate about policy or major issues of substance; or even discussions about personality. Instead, the focus has been on tactics, strategy and coalition building. So, in many ways, the September 2019 look like a redo of the elections that took place in April. However, one of the notable differences in this second round has been the focus on mergers of parties.

As can be seen in the two backgrounders mentioned above, under the Israeli system, any party that does not win at least 3.25% of total votes cast (around 130,000 votes) does not enter the Knesset, and any votes cast for that party are completely discarded. In the recent April elections a number of parties did not make it past this number, known as the “electoral threshold,” including The New Right (of Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked), Moshe Feiglin’s Zehut Party and Orly Levy’s Geshet Party. The New Right fell just 1,344 votes short of the threshold. Had they won those extra votes, the party would have had four seats in the Knesset, and Netanyahu (who was only one seat short of his 61 majority) would have had the support to continue as prime minister, without new elections.

This fear of votes being “thrown away,” and its significant consequences, has led many parties – on both the right and the left – to merge, and thus avoid the risk of not making it past the threshold. As a result of these mergers, the next Knesset is set to have the lowest number of parties in many years.

## The Parties: Who is standing, and what has changed since April?

### Likud

- The Likud, led by current Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, won 35 seats in the April elections, but did not manage to reach deals with enough other parties to build a coalition of 61.
- The party has since merged with Moshe Kahlon's Kulanu Party. Kulanu just scraped into the Knesset in April and was in danger of not making it past the electoral threshold this time.
- Likud did not hold new primaries and will keep the same list of candidates as it had in April (with the addition of 4 Kulanu members in the top 35).
- In response to ongoing rumors and suggestions that Likud members could back an alternative to Netanyahu following the elections (in order to form a coalition with parties who refuse to sit with the current prime minister), the top 40 candidates on the Likud list all publicly committed to back only Netanyahu as prime minister.
- At the beginning of September, Prime Minister Netanyahu announced that he had also reached an agreement with the leader of the Zehut Party, Moshe Feiglin. In return for Feiglin dropping out of the race and endorsing Likud, Netanyahu has agreed that if he remains prime minister, he will advance medical cannabis legislation, and will make Feiglin a government minister.
- Polls suggest that the joint Likud – Kulanu list will win around 30 seats; 5 less than in April.

### Blue and White

- The center-left party, led by Benny Gantz (and Yair Lapid) will also keep the same list of candidates as it had in April, despite earlier speculation that it would add another woman to its "top 10" (the party has been criticized for a dearth of females in senior positions).
- The party has also said that if it wins the opportunity to form a government, it will maintain the arrangement whereby Gantz will be prime minister for the first two years, and will then rotate with Yair Lapid.
- There are a number of reports of internal divisions within the party, with Lapid urging stronger criticism of the ultra-Orthodox, and Gantz - at first – leaning to a more conciliatory posture. In recent weeks, Gantz has moved closer towards Lapid's anti-haredi stances.
- Similarly, Lapid is adamant that the party should not work with Netanyahu under any circumstances, whereas Gantz may be willing consider such a move. Adding to the lack of party unity, the media has reported that Gantz procured the services of a private investigations company to determine who, from within the party, had been leaking strategies to the press.
- Polls suggest that Blue and White will also win around 30 seats (down from 35 in April).

### The United Right

- Since the results of the April elections, leaders of Israel's right have been even more concerned that votes for their "block" will be thrown away on parties that do not pass the electoral threshold.
- As pressure increased on all parties "to the right of the Likud" to merge into one group, polls showed that former justice minister Ayelet Shaked was the most popular candidate to lead this new merged party.
- Given that the party – and its supporters – are made up almost entirely of members of the "national religious" public, it is noteworthy that Shaked, the new leader, is not observant. She is also the only woman leading a party that is likely to be in the next Knesset.
- After Shaked, the party's list (in order), continues with Bayit Yehudi leader, Education Minister Rabbi Rafi Peretz; then National Union leader, Transportation Minister Bezalel Smotrich; followed by former New Right leader Naftali Bennett.
- Many on the far right had hoped that that an additional deal would have been signed to add Otzma Yehudit (whose leadership is often described as "neo-Kahanist") to the merged United Right list, as well as Moshe Feiglin's Zehut and possibly even the anti-LGQTB party Noam. Nonetheless, no further merger agreement was made (despite intense negotiations) and Otzma and Noam will run alone. This has led to concern on the right, once again, that thousands of votes will be thrown away.

- Polls suggest that the United Right will win around 11 seats. Noam has never passed the threshold in any major poll. Otzma had also consistently polled under the threshold until September 7, when for the first time, a poll showed Otzma making it in to the Knesset.

#### United Arab List

- Similar to other groups, the four main Arab parties have also merged their lists (they ran as two separate groups in April but had served in the prior Knesset as a joint list).
- Polls suggest that the United Arab List will win around 11 seats.

#### Yisrael Beiteinu

- Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu Party is widely seen as the group that brought about the second round of elections, by refusing to accept a compromise on legislation regarding the haredi draft.
- Lieberman's list will remain the same as it was in April, but polls show him doubling his strength, presumably as he is being seen as "standing up to the ultra-Orthodox parties' demands."
- Likud remains furious with Lieberman for preventing the formation of a right-wing government in April, and has launched a significant campaign aimed at winning over traditionally Lieberman-supporting, Russian-speaking voters. Likud is also trying hard to label Lieberman as "left" despite his reputation as being staunchly right.
- Before the April elections, Lieberman had said that he supported Netanyahu for prime minister, but today he says that he will push for a national unity government with Likud, Blue and White, and his own party.
- Despite statements by Lieberman that he would recommend the leader of the largest party for prime minister, speculation has increased that he may be seeking the top job for himself, perhaps in rotation with Netanyahu.
- Polls suggest that Yisrael Beiteinu will win around 10 seats.

#### Ultra-Orthodox parties: United Torah Judaism and Shas

- Both parties will retain their identical lists, and both continue to recommend Netanyahu for prime minister.
- Current polls give UTJ 8 seats (same as in April), and Shas 7 (down one from April).

#### Democratic Camp

- The Democratic Camp is a newly merged group on the left. It is comprised of Meretz, former prime minister Ehud Barak's Israel Democratic Party, and Stav Shaffir who was a popular MK from the Labor Party who has left to join this new alliance.
- Here too, the somewhat unusual partnership formed in large part as a result of fear that votes would be lost if they were cast for a party that did not cross the electoral threshold.
- The partnership is "unusual" because it brings together former prime minister Ehud Barak, a successful business leader and former IDF chief of staff who is mistrusted by many in the Arab population for his handling of the October 2000 protests in the Arab sector; as well as Arab MKs from the further-left Meretz, in addition to firmly left-leaning social democrats.
- The party is headed by newly-elected Meretz leader Nitzan Horowitz (who is the only openly gay person to lead a major political party in Israel), with Shaffir in the second slot.
- Interestingly, Ehud Barak requested the probably unrealistic tenth slot apparently to signal that he is not interested in his own position, and will be followed in the 11<sup>th</sup> slot by Rabbi Gilad Kariv, the leader of the Reform Movement in Israel.
- Despite much speculation, former opposition chair Tzipi Livni declined to join this group.
- The party is currently polling 8 seats.

#### Labor/ Geshet

- After falling to a historical low of just 6 seats, the Labor Party has changed dramatically since April.
- Former leader Amir Peretz has replaced Avi Gabby, who has dropped off the list.
- MKs Tal Rousso and Shelly Yachimovich have also left, as has Stav Shaffir who left to join the Democratic Camp.
- Labor has now also merged with Orly Levy's Geshet party, which did not cross the electoral threshold in April. Like Peretz, Levy is considered a social welfare activist, but unlike Peretz, she leans to the right on defense and foreign policy.

- Many commentators assert that Peretz hopes to win some support from traditionally right-leaning voters. Despite hopes by some in the Democratic Camp that Peretz would join that merged group, Labor insisted that together with Gesher, it will run independently.
- The party is currently polling 5 seats, and could therefore conceivably risk not making it past the electoral threshold.

### **What outcomes can be expected?**

Based on the polling numbers above, which reflect several of the most recent polls, if elections were held today the totals would look something like this:

#### *Supporting Netanyahu for PM - 56*

Likud - 30

United Right - 11

United Torah Judaism - 8

Shas - 7

#### *Supporting Gantz for PM - 43*

Blue and White - 30

Democratic Camp - 8

Labor/Gesher - 5

#### *Will support a unity government led by whichever party wins the most seats - 10*

Yisrael Beiteinu - 10

#### *Not supporting any candidate -11*

Joint Arab List - 11

### **Stalemate**

Of course this result seems to indicate another stalemate, with no leader able to muster up 61 or more supporters. Netanyahu does not have the numbers to form a coalition on the right, and Gantz does not have enough support to form a coalition on the left. A broad based unity government seems out of the question because Blue and White have ruled out sitting with Netanyahu, and Likud have ruled out replacing Netanyahu (though it is being discussed quietly in some circles).

With the public already furious about a second election, the prospect of a third election is also remote. Therefore, unusually, there are no outcomes that could be classified as “likely” at this stage. Ultimately, one of the “unlikely” possibilities listed here will probably end up being the final result. So, some possible outcomes:

**Majority on the right:** If numbers shift by a few seats, it is conceivable that there will be a majority of 61 or more that support Netanyahu, leaving the current prime minister to continue governing at the head of a coalition that looks very similar to the previous government. This would require at least four seats moving from the center-left (or from Lieberman) to a party on the right. Alternatively, and perhaps even less likely, Lieberman may agree that he is willing to compromise with the ultra-Orthodox in order to join, and ensure a right-wing government. If Otzma makes it past the threshold, Netanyahu’s task of reaching 61 is made easier.

**Majority on the left:** Even less likely than the above scenario could be if a large number of seats move to parties on the left that support Gantz as prime minister; and if Lieberman joins such a center- left coalition. A slightly different version of this outcome could be if the Arab parties, for the first time ever, agree to join a government. Not only is Gantz unlikely to want that outcome, but even with the Arab parties, he still does not currently have the numbers without

Lieberman. Haredi parties have repeated that they will only support Netanyahu; and it is difficult to imagine them in a coalition with Lapid's Yesh Atid, but the haredi parties joining a Gantz-led government is an additional option.

**National Unity Government with Netanyahu:** Since before the last elections, Blue and White has been adamant that they will not join a national unity government under Netanyahu (mainly since he has a likely indictment looming over his head). It could happen after the election that Gantz announces that due to the "unusual situation" and special circumstances, he feels obliged to join a unity government. If this were to happen, it is possible that Blue and White would split up, since one of its major component parts—Yesh Atid (led by Yair Lapid) is more strongly opposed to sitting with Netanyahu; and only a section of the party would join the government. An alternative to this could be that the national unity government agrees to a rotating leadership, with Benny Gantz assuming the prime ministership for part of the term. Perhaps Gantz would join such a government under the proviso that he would not remain if an indictment against Netanyahu is issued (something that is quite possible in just a few months' time).

**National Unity Government without Netanyahu:** If none of the above scenarios work out, there could be significant pressure on Netanyahu to resign. That pressure could come from the public, and also from President Rivlin. However, Netanyahu remains very popular among large segments of the population and Likud members are famously loyal to their leader - and especially to Netanyahu - so the pressure would need to be very strong. If this were to occur, there are several senior Likud figures who might step up to lead the party including current Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein, or possibly Minister Yisrael Katz, Minister Gilad Erdan or Gideon Saar. Under new leadership, it would be relatively easy to build a national unity coalition with Blue and White and other parties; either with the new Likud leader as prime minister, or in a rotation agreement with Benny Gantz. But it is worth noting that Netanyahu, having just overtaken David Ben Gurion to become Israel's longest-serving prime minister, is a masterful politician who has more experience and "plays the game" better than almost anyone else. He almost certainly has a strategy and plans to avoid this situation.

Israeli politics are always intriguing, but the coming months appear set to contain even more surprises and twists than before. JFNA's Israel office will continue to offer summaries, background and interpretation throughout the period.

For further information, please contact JFNA's [Dani Wassner](#), Director of Government Relations in Israel.

**Sources:** *The Knesset, Basic Law: The Knesset, Walla! News, The Jerusalem Post, Ha'aretz, The Office of the Prime Minister, Israel Democracy Institute, The Times of Israel, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs.*