

## THE IMPLICATIONS OF ISRAELI ELECTIONS ON PALESTINIANS

Omar Shaban\*

The results of the recent Israeli elections that took place on 9 April 2019 clearly indicated that reaching peace with the Palestinians is not likely to happen in the near future. The results confirmed that the biggest losers of these elections are the parties favourable to the peace process and the two-state solution. The would-be formulated Israeli government will consist of the right-wing parties who do not propose peace with the Palestinians in line with the Oslo accords and international standards.

Centrist and right-wing Israeli parties cannot make peace with the Palestinians. They have deliberately ignored the two-state solution – or even peace negotiations with the Palestinian Authority (PA) – during their electoral campaigns, meaning that political ambiguity remains the norm. Even the proposals of Netanyahu's main rival, retired General Benny Gantz, head of the Blue and White party, do not appear wildly different. He eschews talking of Palestinian statehood, and argues that Israel should maintain control of parts of the West Bank and never

give up Jerusalem, including its occupied districts.<sup>1</sup>

Netanyahu's fifth term in office raises concerns for the Palestinians. It is a sign that efforts to resolve the conflict have come to an end, particularly now that other right-wing parties are granting him a chance to meet political promises he made during the election campaign. The Prime Minister vowed to continue building settlements in the West Bank, keeping the Palestinians divided and preventing the PA from returning

\*Founder and director of PalThink for Strategic Studies, Gaza

<sup>1</sup> Holmes, O. (2019, April 5). Best of the worst? Israel's left looks to Gantz as election nears. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/05/best-of-the-worst-israels-left-looks-to-gantz-as-election-nears>

Gaza back under its authority. In an interview with the *Israel Hayom* newspaper on 4 April, Netanyahu stressed that the Gaza Strip and the West Bank have become separate entities, and that this is not particularly a bad thing for Israel. He said: “[Abbas] brought that upon himself. He cut back the influx of PA funds [to Gaza]. He thought that by doing so, he could send Gaza up in flames.”<sup>2</sup>

In the last decade, Netanyahu has managed to drag Israeli society to the far right by building more settlements than ever, convincing them that a political agreement with the Palestinians will threaten their security; by promising that he is capable of reaching a regional solution to the conflict by normalising relations with Arab countries, particularly in the context of growing geopolitical tensions between them and Iran; and, ultimately, by finding a humanitarian solution under the slogan of economic peace, thus exploiting the Palestinian divide. Israel will manipulate the Palestinian people by pursuing two strategies: undermining the PA and cooling the Gaza front through limited humanitarian facilitations.

### **Undermining the PA and the Chances of Reaching a Two-State Solution**

In this election campaign, Netanyahu threatened to widen the political divide between the West Bank and Gaza, to then

separate them from each other and recognise Palestinians’ self-rule over Gaza while retaining control over large areas of the West Bank. The annexation of some parts of the latter is even more likely if there is an agreement between the right-wing parties and the Prime Minister on the enactment of a law to fortify his position, so that he can get rid of corruption charges in exchange for imposing Israeli sovereignty on the West Bank. Simply put, the annexation of the West Bank is a number one priority for the new government.

Many Palestinians consider that part of the Deal of the Century has already been implemented by moving the US embassy to Jerusalem, recognising it as the capital of Israel, along with the suspension of US funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). The fact that both Trump and Netanyahu are the main promoters of this plan increases the likelihood of consistent Palestinian rejection of any future peace deal.

“Trump will not hesitate to recognise Israeli sovereignty over these settlements since he does not respect international law and its obligations,”<sup>3</sup> said Orly Azoulay, an Israeli-American journalist and political writer who works for Yedioth Ahronoth. After recognising Jerusalem as the capital of the State of Israel

2 Abu Amer, A. (2019, April 14). Israel fans flames separating Palestinians in Gaza, West Bank. *Al-Monitor*. Retrieved from <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/04/israel-netanyahu-gaza-hamas-abbas-palestinian-separation.html#ixzz5mHcVMzKG>

3 Al-Nami, S. (2019, April 11). Israeli commentators: “Deal of the Century” to justify the annexation of settlements. *Alaraby.co.uk*. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2GeFUHM>

and Israel's claims over the Golan Heights, Trump played an essential role in supporting Netanyahu's re-election, as he is aware that winning the 2020 US presidential elections depends mainly on the continued support from the Christian-Evangelical camp, which overtly favours the Israeli Prime Minister. Given the campaign's promises and political alliances, it is unlikely that Netanyahu will interrupt the settlement policy in the West Bank. In fact, the Knesset has initiated at least sixty bills paving the way for annexation, which would add to the eight laws that have already been ratified and entered into force.

### **Cooling the Gaza Front through Limited Facilitation of Humanitarian Aspects**

As for the Gaza Strip, Netanyahu's new government is expected to continue its understanding with Hamas despite occasional escalations that will not likely amount to all-out fighting. Israel will maintain the status quo with Hamas in order to retain semi-control over Gaza, but without granting it real sovereignty. In fact, it seems that Netanyahu's plan is to keep a Cold War-like stability in Gaza. His previous government allowed twice the transfer of US\$15m from Qatar to Hamas employees, increased the electricity supply to the Strip, widened its fishing zone from 6 miles to 15 miles and transferred Qatar-funded food assistance to its needy families.

Truth be told, the current situation is optimal for Israel, so coercive force will be its last resort. This is Netanyahu's policy to deal

with Hamas, and this explains why he won by a significant margin in areas like Sderot, where the Prime Minister received 44% of the votes, in comparison with only 9% for the Blue and White party. A result that confirms the settlers' satisfaction with his positions on Gaza.

Netanyahu has succeeded in portraying the settlers living near the borders with Gaza as victims of Palestinian violence, not only in the eyes of Israeli society but also the world. Israeli settlers have received substantial financial compensation and support from his government. The vast majority of them have voted for the Prime Minister's re-election, since he is perceived as the one who protected them by reaching a truce with Hamas and constructing an electronic wall underground and above between Gaza and Israel.

### **Options for a Limited Confrontation with the Palestinians**

There is a consensus among Palestinian leaders on the misfortune of the election results: under the pretext of maintaining the status quo, Israelis said no to peace and yes to the occupation. For Israelis the peace process is dead, Israel should annex areas of the West Bank and continue to blackmail the PA through various means, for instance deducting part of the clearing funds on which it relies as revenues in its budget.

These deep-seated convictions are also reinforced by the full trust in the far-right in Israel, with extremism spreading top-down

throughout Israeli society. The expansion of extremism and hate speech in Israel indicates that future scenarios will be tough on Palestinians, due to the impact that the far right will have on the legislative and executive state institutions in the near future. The racist discourse against the Arabs and the enactment of discriminatory laws, best exemplified by the Jewish Nation-Station Law, are further strengthening Netanyahu's position among the settlers.

Last but not least, it is evident that Palestinians should have a real strategy of

steadfastness and confrontation, but the intra-Palestinian divide hinders all efforts of having a coherent strategy against Israeli oppressive and unjust policies. This could push the PA into adopting more of a confrontational approach by formally activating the decisions adopted by the National and Central Palestinian Councils in May 2018. These decisions were: 1) reconsidering the political and economic relations with Israel; 2) stopping the security relations and coordination with Israel; 3) boycotting Israeli products; and 4) activating popular pressure against Israel.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> PNC orders PLO Executive Committee to suspend recognition of Israel (2018, May 4). *Wafa*. Retrieved from <http://english.wafa.ps/page.aspx?id=RXRo2ya97540406205aRXRo2y>

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