

# Bibi Won, But Path Forward Won't Veer Right

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TEL AVIV—It wasn't supposed to turn out this way—at least not according to the pollsters, Israeli progressives, and certain Democrats who offer political advice to the White House.

Yesterday's election for Israel's 20th Knesset was supposed to be a referendum on Benjamin "Bibi" Netanyahu that would produce a repudiation of the three-term prime minister. Bibi-haters got their referendum, but against the odds, it produced a decisive victory for Netanyahu, his Likud party, and the right wing nationalist camp in Israel.

The secular elites were in agreement: Bibi had to go, which in practice meant that Isaac "Bougie" Herzog, head of the center-left Zionist Union party, would become Israel's next prime minister.

Substantial amounts of foreign money poured into Israel to oust Bibi. Some of it came from Qatar in support of the Arab party. Some came from Europe in the hopes of bringing to power a government that would end Israel's control of the West Bank. And a considerable amount of money came from the United States on behalf of the V-15 campaign, which was run by former Obama presidential campaign operatives.

According to the final pre-election polls, Zionist Union was cruising to victory over Likud.

When the polls closed at 10 p.m. Tuesday, TV screens immediately flashed exit poll results that proclaimed a tie between Bougie and Bibi, with each party winning 27 seats in Israel's 120-member parliament. This was interpreted as a major comeback for Bibi.

In Israel's parliamentary system, it takes a coalition of 61 to form a government. With the exit polls showing the two largest parties receiving less than 50 percent of the seats, and the rest of the votes distributed among eight other parties fanning the political spectrum, Israelis braced themselves for a lengthy period of post-election jockeying by party leaders in pursuit of suitable coalition partners and favorable coalition terms.

Most Israelis went to sleep thinking that President Reuven Rivlin would face a difficult decision in the coming days about whom to invite to form a government. And they assumed that it would take many weeks to determine whether Israel's new government would rest on a narrow right wing coalition headed by Bibi, a center-left coalition headed by Bougie, or a national unity government in which the two largest parties joined forces and shared power.

By dawn, the uncertainty had been dispelled. With 99 percent of the vote counted, Netanyahu's party had won big. With 30 seats to the Zionist Union's 24, Likud had achieved a larger margin of victory than the final pre-election polls had assigned to Bougie. The numbers make it all but certain that Rivlin will invite Netanyahu to form a government.

The left in Israel, however, should not despair. Nor should the right gloat. Circumstances and convictions would have constrained Bougie's leftward impulses and they will disperse some of the rightward pressures on Netanyahu.

There is little doubt that a Herzog-led left-center coalition would have brought a gentler, more conciliatory tone to Israeli diplomacy. His government would have focused to a greater degree on the economic and social issues that a majority of the electorate put at the top of their concerns. And he would have moved to significantly restrict if not freeze settlement activity beyond the Green Line.

At the same time, it's reasonable to expect an emboldened Bibi, who continues to talk tough, to approve building in West Bank towns and cities, and to prefer privatization and free market economics.

Yet just as Herzog was not the sniveling weakling that Bibi made him out to be during the campaign, Bibi is not the chest-thumping ideologue depicted by Herzog—along with the Israeli media and the Western press.

Take, for example, West Bank construction. Under Netanyahu, most of the building has taken place in areas most Israeli believe will remain part of Israel in any eventual deal with the Palestinians. And there has been significantly less construction activity than is commonly supposed.

Moreover, it appears likely that to form a coalition, Netanyahu will name Moshe Kahlon, a former Likud member and head of the new centrist party Kulanu, which won 10 seats, to be minister of the treasury. Kahlon made the promotion of social and economic justice the centerpiece of his campaign, even as Bibi acknowledged that his government had done too little to deal with the escalating cost of living in Israel, particularly the crushing price of housing. As minister of the treasury, Kahlon could well give a progressive hue to the next Netanyahu government.

One reason Israelis were more focused than usual in this election on social and economic issues was because of the underlying agreement on national security issues. It will provide cold comfort to many Israelis on the left—and to the White House—but a Herzog government, which would have offered measured and hopeful rhetoric, would not have imposed a dramatic shift in national security policy.

Herzog knows perfectly well that Israel confronts two Palestinian dictatorships: a Hamas regime in Gaza and, in the West Bank, where Mahmoud Abbas's four-year term as president of the Palestinian Authority expired more than six years ago, a Fatah dictatorship. And Herzog is aware that if the Israeli Army were to withdraw completely from the West Bank, Hamas would promptly overthrow the current Fatah regime and install its own.

In addition, Herzog understands that the Islamic State, which is sowing terror throughout the region in its quest for Sunni-style Islamist hegemony, endangers Israel's security, not least by threatening to destabilize the West Bank. Herzog also understands that a nuclear-armed Iran, which is sowing terror throughout the region in its quest for Shia-style Islamist hegemony, would represent a grave strategic threat to Israel.

A few days before the election, Netanyahu created a stir by apparently abandoning the commitment to a two-state solution he announced in June 2009 at Bar Ilan University. "I think that anyone who moves to establish a Palestinian state today, and evacuate areas," the prime minister declared, "is giving radical Islam an area from which to attack the State of Israel." Those on the left, he warned, are ignoring this reality by "burying their heads in the sand."

In fact, Bibi was not repudiating the principle of two states for two people but rather stating, in a manner designed to appeal to his base, that the principle cannot be effectively acted on in current circumstances.

Just as the those on the Israeli right had less to fear from Bougie than they wanted to believe, so too members of the Israeli center-left camp—along with left-liberals throughout the West—have less to be afraid of than they like to think from Benjamin Netanyahu's fourth term as Israel's prime minister.

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