



# ELECTIONS IN ISRAEL: BACKGROUND, BLOCS, FORECASTS

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## INTRODUCTION

**T**he political life in Israel has been facing an insurmountable political stalemate since 2019. After the elections held in March 2021, the next election was expected to be held no later than November 11, 2025, as per the four-year peri-

od determined by the Basic Laws. A government was formed following these elections after eight parties from different political orientations joined forces. This situation led to comments that the government was fragile from the very first moment it was established. In fact, although the political approaches of the parties (nationalist/conser-

Failing to achieve results in the difficult domestic political problems, the Israeli Government faced dissolution at an early date.

vative, centrist, Islamist, and liberal) forming the coalition are quite different from each other, the main motivation that brought them together is the end of the 12-year-long Netanyahu government. In the following process, in June, the government announced early elections due to the problems experienced in the country, especially in domestic politics. Israeli citizens are due to go to the polls again on November 1, 2022. The 25th government in Israel will be formed after the election, which will be held for the fifth time in a row, for the first time in 3.5 years in Israel's history.

## BACKGROUND

The political stalemate that led to the repeat of elections in Israel emerged as a result of the difficult elections held on 9 April 2019, 17 September 2019, 2 March 2020, and 21 March 2021. Early elections were held due to the fact that then-incumbent Prime Minister Netanyahu and the leader of the main opposition party, Blue and White, Benny Gantz, could not reach the majority (61 seats) in the Israeli Parliament in the elections held in April and September 2019. In the next elections, which took place on March 2, 2020, it was declared that the government was no longer functioning

after the budget disagreement between Netanyahu and Gantz in December, and it was announced that early elections would be held on March 21, 2021. The elections, which took place in March 2021, resulted in the establishment of an eight-party unity government, in which Naftali Bennett, the former leader of the Yamina Party, and Yair Lapid, the leader of Yesh Atid, agreed to become Prime Minister respectively. Two years later, Bennett became the first Prime Minister and it was decided that the next Prime Minister would be Lapid, the leader of Yesh Atid. The coalition government is a first in Israeli political history as it includes a party (Ra'am) representing the Palestinian citizens of Israel. Mansur Abbas, leader of the United Arab List (aka Ra'am), stated that he joined the coalition to provide better service and more government funding to the Palestinians living in Israel, who make up about 20 percent of the population.

## PROCESS THAT LEADS ISRAEL TO REPEAT ELECTIONS

### Domestic Political Developments

The Bennett and Lapid governments focused on the most fundamental issues that were



Prime Minister Yair Lapid spoke at the first Cabinet meeting about the decision to hold early elections on November 1, after he took the office from former Prime Minister Naftali Bennett.

inherited from the Netanyahu era in foreign policy, especially the normalization process that started after the signing of the Abraham Agreements between Israel and the Gulf countries and the developments related to the Iran nuclear deal. As some Israeli officials have stated in recent years, Israel's foreign policy has made significant gains in recent years and has emerged as an area that increases the strength of the current coalition. However, an asymmetrical picture emerges when the foreign policy profile of the Israeli government is compared with its domestic policy. At this point, the main developments that led to the dissolution of the government were experienced in domestic politics.

The coalition that took office in Israel defined itself as a "government of change" in order to resolve the long-term political stalemate and to show that it is aware of the difficult issues that await solutions in do-

mestic politics. It is possible to perceive this situation as the government's acceptance of the need for change in the political approach put forward by governments in Israel. However, in the following process, it was observed that the government could not put forward a clear agenda on the subjects where the country needed change. This situation has caused the issues waiting to be resolved, especially in domestic politics, to enter a new waiting period. In being aware of the difficulty of keeping eight parties together, Bennett avoided focusing on difficult issues in order to meet the expectations of the public and to prevent the coalition from faltering in the early going. At this point, Israel's occupation of the West Bank, which is one of the most crucial issues in Israeli politics, and related issues have been pushed into the background. However, even though it was postponed, the Palestine issue be-

came one of the most fundamental issues that dealt a blow to the current weakness of the coalition in the following process.

The announcement regarding the dissolution of the government came after the Israeli government failed to renew the state of emergency law in June, which protects the two-tier legal system in the occupied West Bank. There are expectations that this process will also shed light on the debates about whether the eight-party coalition government is fragile and will be a test in this regard. The law in question is about the privileges of Israeli settlers living in the West Bank, occupied by Israel in 1967, such as being sentenced in civilian courts, being sent to civilian prisons, and benefiting from the social security system. The abolition of the law, which extends the state of emergency in the region every five years, proves to be a sensitive issue for Israeli governments since it means the prosecution of settlers accused of criminal offenses. Problems were experienced in the Knesset during the voting process of the bill, and some of the Yamina Party deputies physically attacked the Arab deputies who voted against the bill, thereby causing tensions in the parliament. Yair Lapid, the Minister of Foreign Affairs at the time, stated that the coalition blocs in the government would submit the bill to the Knesset again in the near future, and that it was imperative for the coalition partner parties to undertake the necessary responsibilities. Foreign Minister Lapid's approach received reactions from the coalition partner Joint List and from the Palestinian citizens of Israel. One of the main issues that the government has had difficulty managing after taking office has been the rise of tensions between Israel and the Palestinians in re-

cent years. Masjid al-Aqsa frequently came on the agenda with the raids and interventions by the Israeli police, as fanatic Jews increased their pressure on Masjid al-Aqsa under the control of the Israeli police after the start of Passover, which the Jews celebrate in April. In this process, the Palestinians, who tried to react to the raids, were exposed to the intervention of the Israeli forces. Tensions increased after the Israeli police intervened with rubber-coated bullets and sound bombs, especially after the morning prayer, for the young Palestinian group who entered the Mughrabi Gate of Masjid al-Aqsa and threw stones inside. As a result of the agreement signed with Jordan in 1994, Masjid al-Aqsa was placed under the authority of the Department of the Jerusalem Awqaf and Al-Aqsa Mosque Affairs, affiliated with The Jordanian Ministry of Awqaf Islamic Affairs and Holy Places, and Jews were forbidden to perform worship inside its premises. However, Palestinians maintain vigil inside since the security guards turn a blind eye to the Jews who perform worship inside. The Department of the Jerusalem Awqaf and Al-Aqsa Mosque Affairs states that the number of Jewish settlers who raided Masjid al-Aqsa exceeded a thousand. Tensions further escalated when the far-right MP Itamar Ben-Gvir and MP Idit Silman, who recently resigned from the coalition government on the grounds that "the government did not pursue enough right-wing politics", joined the raids on Masjid al-Aqsa.

A few months after these developments, the government in Israel was already walking a thin line when Shireen Abu Akleh, the field reporter of Qatar-based Al Jazeera television, was killed and another journalist, Ali es-Sumudi, was injured during an incident

in Jenin Refugee Camp in the West Bank on May 11. Therefore, the government's course further deteriorated. After the incident, Al Jazeera and the Palestinian Authority accused the Israeli Armed Forces of deliberately killing Abu Akleh by shooting at her while she was on duty. The Israeli Army, on the other hand, stated that "according to preliminary estimates, there are signs that Abu Akleh was killed by the bullets of Palestinian gunmen". Following the completion of the investigation process, the Israeli Army further stated that an Israeli soldier under fire "probably mistakenly" targeted Palestinian-American journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, mistakenly identifying her as an armed militant. According to the official investigation, it was stated that Abu Akleh was probably shot by an Israeli soldier using telescopic binoculars and misidentified as an armed Palestinian. The Chief of Staff of the Israeli Army, Aviv Kochavi, described Abu Akleh's death as an "unfortunate event" and stated that the incident occurred during operational activities to prevent "Palestinian terrorism". In some statements in the press, it has been stated that there is a deep belief that no one can question the rules of engagement determined by Israel behind the emergence of such mistakes during the operations carried out by Israeli soldiers. It has been pointed out that similar cases are likely in the future as Israel does not feel any responsibility towards the Palestinians and international criticism.

Further problems between the USA and Israel were triggered when the Israeli Defense Forces announced that they would not launch an investigation against any Israeli soldier. US officials stated that they are considering asking Israel to re-examine its

rules of engagement in the West Bank after the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) stated that a soldier was likely to be responsible for the murder of journalist Shireen Abu Akleh. It is highly likely that the Biden administration is trying to apply more pressure on Israel's operations in Gaza and the West Bank, especially after the reaction of the international community to the killing of Abu Akleh. In making a statement on the developments, Israeli Prime Minister Lapid stated that he will not allow an IDF soldier to be tried for "defending himself against terrorists' shooting". Lapid's statements were also supported by the Israeli Defense Minister, Gantz, who stated that Israel's rules of engagement are determined only by the IDF Chief of Staff and that Israel will continue to determine its "open fire" policy in accordance with operational needs and ethical doctrine. On the other hand, some Democratic members of the US Congress stated that the report submitted by Israel regarding the killing of Abu Akleh was not sufficient. It is known that currently the US Embassy in Israel is preparing an internal report on the Israeli Army's Yehuda Battalion, which is allegedly linked to the death of 78-year-old Omar Assad, another Palestinian-American citizen. In the contrast to the case of Abu Akleh, the US administration openly called for a criminal investigation into Assad's death. In August, the detention of a senior executive from the Palestinian Islamic Jihad group in the West Bank further increased the tension in the region. Israeli Prime Minister Lapid, who published a video message after the developments, discussed the detention process in the context of the fight against terrorism, while the Israeli Ministry of Defense announced that attacks were carried out on locations associated with Islamic Jihad. According to the news



A group gathered in the Nuseirat region of the Gaza Strip and held a demonstration in support of Masjid al-Aqsa.

The Palestinian issue emerged as one of the main issues that further deteriorated the Coalition's already existing weakness.

from Gaza, at least 10 people lost their lives and 55 people were injured, including the Islamic Jihad Commander, Tay-sir al-Jabari. All these developments have put the Israeli government in a tight place.

### Dissolution of the Government

The Coalition Government in Israel was shaken when some deputies resigned from Yamina, Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's party, which held the majority in the Knesset with 61 deputies. On April 6, 2022, Deputy Idit Silman left Yamina due to a disagreement with Health Minister Nitzan Horowitz and joined Netanyahu's Likud party. Silman, who was the Chairman of the House Health Committee at that time, resigned from his party due to the argument he had with Horowitz about allowing

non-kosher food to be served in hospitals during Passover. Shortly after that, on May 19, 2022, Meretz Deputy Gayda Rinavi Zuabi announced that she resigned from the coalition, claiming that the government had adopted a firm stance on Israel-Palestine issues. On June 13, Yamina Deputy Orbach announced that he was leaving the coalition, claiming that the left-wing members of the coalition had taken the coalition hostage. Following these developments, on June 20, 2022, Bennett and Lapid announced in a joint statement that a bill for dissolving the Knesset was submitted to the parliament due to the deep problems that the Coalition experienced.<sup>1</sup> After that, the strategic course of the actors that led the Coalition was questioned by many. In this context, Bennett, who was the

<sup>1</sup> "Israel Elections: All the dates you need to know", *Jerusalem Post*, 26 August 2022.

first to assume the position of Prime Minister in the coalition, announced on June 29 that he resigned from the Yamina leadership and would not continue his political life. Ayelet Shaked, who had a hawkish approach to the Palestinians and the Palestinian issue, took over the leadership of Yamina after Bennett. Leaving his office, Bennett stated that his government left a "developing, strong and safe country" and showed that parties from different ends of the political spectrum could work together.<sup>2</sup>

Many observers point out that the coalition remained in office for about 15 months and lasted longer than many observers had anticipated. It shows that the government faced many different problems, from religious issues to the Palestinian issue, and tried to sustain itself under difficult circumstances and a technical framework. Following the decision to hold early elections, Lapid replaced Bennett as interim prime minister as of June 30, according to the coalition agreement. In June, the decision to dissolve the coalition government was taken, and the country entered the repeat election process. After handing over the Prime Ministry to Lapid, Bennett announced that he would take a break from politics and would not run for the upcoming elections. The departure of party members who felt that Bennett was making excessive concessions to his more liberal coalition allies after the government was formed last year played an important role in his decision.<sup>3</sup>

As the successive election processes created election fatigue in Israeli society,

one could observe that the politicians have developed a narrow perspective on why such a picture has emerged. At this point, Netanyahu and his bloc, one of the main actors in the election process that will take place in November, do not focus on the real problems that lead the country to a dead end, ignore the Palestinian issue, and develop a solution that will save Israel from the electoral deadlock only through the field of the economy. Shortly after the decision to dissolve parliament, Likud leader Netanyahu stated that prices in Israel have risen dramatically and that his priority once in office will be to bring prices down.<sup>4</sup> Announcing his economic program on social media last month, Netanyahu underlined that rising prices are directly related to the government's instability and that the situation in the country can be described as a deep economic crisis. Remarking that only a stable government can bring prices down, Netanyahu pointed out that the 0.5% increase in prices during his tenure between 2015 and 2019 cannot be compared to the 4.5% increase last year. He also emphasized that while the Covid-19 pandemic and the Ukraine crisis caused an upward trend in prices yet it cannot be justified for inaction. According to Netanyahu's plan, the economic crisis could be overcome, but slowing down the growth in prices and reducing taxes should be the main purpose of this stage, and in order to slow down inflation, Israel should reduce the prices of electricity, gasoline, water, and municipal taxes, which it promised to freeze for a year and defined as inflation instigators.

<sup>2</sup> "Israel heads to Nov 1 election with Netanyahu waiting", *Reuters*, 30 June 2022.

<sup>3</sup> "Israel set for November election as parliament dissolves", *Al Jazeera*, 30 June 2022.

<sup>4</sup> "Israel heads to Nov 1 election with Netanyahu waiting", *Reuters*, 30 June 2022.

## FINAL PREDICTIONS FOR THE ELECTIONS

On September 15, 2022, Israeli political parties submitted their final lists of election candidates. However, the current situation indicates that it is very difficult to break the deadlock between Netanyahu and his rivals. As the elections in Israel approach, opinion polls reveal very similar pictures regarding the current situation. According to the latest opinion polls, the opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu's bloc remained at 59 seats in the 121-seat Knesset. According to another poll, in the event of an election today, Likud is the strongest group in the Knesset with 32 seats, while Prime Minister Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid is in second place with 23 Knesset seats. According to yet another survey, the Religious Zionist Party of MPs Bezael Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir is expected to win 11 seats in the poll, while Shas, led by Aryeh Deri, won one seat against Likud and rose to 9 seats, and finally, United Torah Judaism, led by Moshe Gafni, has seven seats. Apart from the Yesh Atid Party led by Yair Lapid, the National Union headed by Defense Minister Benny Gantz won 12, the Labor Party led by Merav Michaeli and the Yisrael Beitenu led by Liberman won 6, and the New Hope Party led by Gideon Saar won 5 seats. It is estimated that the United Arab List, which is not included in any block, will win 4 seats, while the Yamina and Meretz parties will not pass the election threshold.

Although these figures differ by one or two points in the opinion polls, only a small number of polls show Netanyahu is likely to form a government in Israel. At this point,

both New Hope Party leader Gideon Sa'ar and Yisrael Beitenu leader Avigdor Liberman have stated that they will not be included in a government led by Netanyahu. Labor Party leader Marev Michaeli recently said that his party will not work on a common platform with the Meretz Party, which is defined as a pigeon.<sup>5</sup> In addition to this fragmented structure, the Arab bloc also suffers from divisions during the election process. Such a situation reduces the political influence of the Arab bloc. According to the picture that has already emerged, during the elections on November 1, Netanyahu will be heading a bloc composed of right-wing and ultra-religious parties, while incumbent Prime Minister Lapid will lead a much more fragmented bloc stretching from left to right. The news in the press states that the Arab political party Balad will compete separately from the other parties in the Joint List and points out that if it does not pass the current threshold, it will not be able to enter the parliament, therefore the votes it receives will not win any seats. As it is known, the Arab political party Ra'am Party left the Joint List and joined the coalition in the last March 31 elections, enabling the coalition to form a government without Likud and its leader, Netanyahu. The separation of the Balad Party from the Joint List of Arab parties may make it possible for the other two Arab parties within the bloc to play a critical role in the formation of the coalition once again. However, this situation raises questions as it is not known whether the bloc led by Lapid will support such an alliance.<sup>6</sup> Under these circumstances, it is expected that there will be a tough competition between the former Prime Minister

<sup>5</sup> "Poll shows Netanyahu-led bloc winning 61 seats, enabling government formation", *The Times of Israel*, 8 July 2022.

<sup>6</sup> "Deadlock predicted as Israel's election campaign kicks off, Arab bloc splits", *The Arab Weekly*, 16 September 2022.



Mansur Abbas, leader of the United Arab List (Ra'am), spoke in an interview on March 31, 2021.

Benjamin Netanyahu, whose judicial process continues due to the lawsuits filed against the November 1 elections, and the bloc formed by parties from all over the political spectrum.

## CONCLUSION

Although the opinion polls conducted more frequently as the elections draw near in Israel show that Likud is the strongest political party at the moment, the possibility of a coalition to take office after the election means that Israel's political uncertainty continues. One could foresee that the country will enter the election process again in a short time if the coalition governments that come to power cannot find solutions to the problems in the fields of the economy and security. At this point, it seems essential for

the influential figures in Israeli politics to reshape their perspectives on the future of the country in order to overcome this stalemate. It is important that Israeli voters, who present a polarized profile, stay away from marginalizing and alienating attitudes that ignore and deeply shake the culture of coexistence. At this point, prominent figures in Israeli politics should realize that the policies implemented against the Palestinians, especially after the 1967 war, prevent not only Palestinians but also Jews living in Israel from living in peace, and that this situation has put the country's politics in a deadlock. However, if such a point of view is obtained, it will be possible to overcome the pre-election dilemma that Israeli politics often faces and achieve the democratic values included in its rhetoric.

It is important that prominent figures in Israeli politics should realize that the policies implemented against the Palestinians prevent not only Palestinians but also Jews living in Israel from living in peace.

## About the Author

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Seher Bulut completed her undergraduate education in the Department of Software Engineering at the Vienna University of Technology and her master's degree in the Department of Information Management at the same university. She completed her Ph.D. degree with a dissertation titled "Turkey and Israel's foreign policy after 2000: A role theoretical comparison" in the Department of International Relations at Selçuk University in 2018. Between 2010 and 2016, Dr. Bulut conducted research on her dissertation topic in the Departments of Political Science and Sociology at the University of Münster in Germany. Dr. Bulut's research interests include Turkish foreign policy, Israeli foreign policy, developments and policies regarding the Syrian crisis, the Turkish diaspora and integration in Europe, etc.



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