

EU-Israel A Tale of Three Elections - An opportunity for reflection

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On the last week of May, as European politicians and commentators were trying to convey the message European voters sent to their capitals and to the institutions in Brussels in the elections to the European Parliament, and Israeli politicians were caught up in a political battle between PM Benjamin Netanyahu and his long time ally and rival, former Defense and Foreign minister Avigdor (Ivet) Liberman, who held the key to Netanyahu's extreme-right and religious orthodox coalition. For a few days, they played "chicken" over the traditional and social media, culminating to an unprecedented session of the newly elected Knesset in which it dissolved itself and called for a new election only one month after its elected members swore in. For the first time in the history of Israel an election rerun, or as the media likes to call it "supplementary elections", was called". There are many interpretations as to what was the motivation that led each of the main political players to choose this particular path. Only time will tell which is right.

The next day, Prime Minister Netanyahu met President Trump's special envoy to the Middle East, his son in law and adviser, Jared Kushner together with the US Middle East team (special envoy Jason Greenblatt and Ambassador to Israel David Friedman). Mr. Kushner handed Netanyahu a gift from the president, that Netanyahu showed proudly to the Israeli public on live TV broadcast and is considered the US president's first gesture to secure him winning the nascent election campaign. This was a printout of an official US map of Israel in which the Golan Heights region is annexed and marked as a non-separable part of the sovereign state of Israel. Substantiating the recent unilateral step made by the Trump administration, in a series of many, siding with Israel and defying decades of an accepted international conception on how the framework for regional peace should look like. "President Trump wrote 'Nice' on this map", said Netanyahu. "I say very nice," he added.

Netanyahu's dissolution of the Knesset and the rerun for office was a blow to president Trump's plan to expose and ignite the alleged "deal of the century" aimed to end the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, in which this writer does not put much faith.

President Trump, eager to fulfil his election campaign pledge to make this “deal of the century”, expressed his frustration as he was leaving the White House on an official visit to the United Kingdom. “Bibi got elected, now all of a sudden they're going to have to go through the process again. That's ridiculous”, he criticized Israeli political shakeup.

Nonetheless, this was not the only blow to President Trump in this particular week. He could find some comfort in the performance of Nigel Farage and the electoral success of the newly formed Brexit party for the European Parliament elections but as a whole, European voters, while disillusioned with traditional parties, refuted the predictions that extreme right parties and Euro sceptics would carry an overwhelming victory. The performance of the Greens and Liberals gave a blow to all those who tried to import the new populist political language from the United States of Donald Trump to Europe. Despite the expected gains in UK, Italy, France (disputable gain, but this is beyond the scope of this paper), Hungary and Poland, Matteo Salvini's Milan conference proved futile. Steve Bannon's shake up plan for Europe failed or at least was put on hold. To the surprise of many, especially in the Israeli government and right-wing circles, European voters said NO to “Trumpism”. Trump's disappointment in Europe is also Netanyahu's disappointment and not because of their close friendship.

Although European voters sent a message of change in certain aspects, it is generally expected that the new EP will not force Brussels to change its course in foreign affairs and security policies, especially in the Israeli context. The European Union will continue to try to perform life support and save the JCPOA signed with Iran, which is loathsome not only by Prime Minister Netanyahu and his government but also by the vast majority of media analysts and the Israeli public. Also the institutions in Brussels will not withhold from constantly reminding the Israelis of the “elephant in the room” - the 2.5 million Palestinians who live under occupation in the West Bank and the other 2 million who live in Gaza under the rule of Hamas and the tight “peripheral control” of Israel.

As much as there is concern and awareness in Brussels of the Palestinian plight, it has been totally eliminated from the political discourse in the last round of elections in Israel and most probably will be absent in the upcoming supplementary round. Netanyahu's containment of Hamas is criticized by his opponents from the left and from the right as a tactical instrument, as he did when campaigning as head of the opposition ten years ago. In the West Bank the principles outlined in the Oslo agreement are implemented with certain variations. The Palestinian Authority is on verge of collapse but Israeli politicians and the public are looking the other way, mainly because no one forces them to face the problem or any consequence. (Even the Zionist Left Meretz party elected a new chairman who led a more intrinsic campaign).

To the annoyance of President Trump, the "Deal of the century" was put on hold and this is considered an acceptable excuse to totally ignore the Issue. Even Brussels has lowered its expectations as Trump's Middle East team, made up of three orthodox Jews with long time affiliation to the settlers in the West Bank.

The continuous efforts by the European Union to keep Israel accountable are perceived by politicians, the media and the public as nuisance in the better case or a provocation in the worst case. The nationalist-populist contender, formerly Netanyahu's foreign minister and minister of defense - Avigdor Lieberman, now plays the secular card. He refused to join Netanyahu's government allegedly due to the many promises he gave to the ultra-orthodox parties (such as the enlistment law) is using the Han El-Ahmar affair, in which the Supreme Court approved the forced removal of Palestinian Bedouins and endorsed the decision to demolish their houses.

Lieberman instrumentally uses this decision to attack Netanyahu's incompetence, implying he does not have the political will to order the forced displacement. He uses it in order to portray the Palestinians as invaders and the Palestinian authority as an entity of terror, he also uses it to show that Netanyahu cannot withstand the pressure imposed on him by the European Union who funded the infrastructure in the village and continuously warns Israel of the consequences of the move. MK Liberman also attacks Netanyahu for not passing a law that will enforce capital punishment on terrorists.

The coercion of a new election campaign is ill received by the Israeli public. It is unprecedented and although coalition arithmetic in the newly elected Knesset may prove it inevitable, it is seen as a symptom of Netanyahu's tendency, in his distress, not to play by the rules. The common interpretation to the Israeli election law and its practice states that after failing to form a coalition, Netanyahu had to hand the mandate back to President Rivlin who should have picked another elected member of the Knesset to try and form a coalition government. Although it seemed unlikely that any other member of the Knesset would have succeeded in this task it was too big a risk for Netanyahu. He is operating as a one man show. He trusts very few people and has virtually no substantial experienced advisors. He intimidates all his party members, without exception, and they diligently follow his instruction even when they know it defies not only the good of the country but also their own personal interest.

Although he managed to tow the law according to his personal need, recent opinion polls show that he is losing support within his base. Partly due to dismay of the procedure mentioned above partly due to the unveiling of his inhibition-less conduct, not to say impulsive to preserve his position, to protect himself from the judicial process. Before April 9th elections, Netanyahu pledged that if elected, he would unilaterally annex Jewish settlements in the West Bank. He vociferously rejected a plea from former security and intelligence officials not to do it, referring to the occupied Palestinian territory as the "heritage of our forefathers", and comparing their warnings regarding the expected consequences to the warnings against him jeopardizing Israel-US relations while criticizing the 2015 JCPOA. While in previous campaigns Netanyahu could smoother his base with anti-Arab declarations before elections and was forced to withdraw after he won, due to US pressure, under the Trump administration there is no such moderating force. As the supplementary September elections are approaching, Netanyahu will increase his pledge to change the status quo of the settlers and the Palestinians in the West Bank.

While the "Peace for Prosperity" workshop Trump's peace team organized in Bahrain refrained from using the word 'occupation' and US ambassador to Israel David Friedman, who has a direct personal contact with president Trump, supports the proposed Israeli annexation, the EU administration refers to East Jerusalem as part of the occupied territories, a definition very few

Israelis, even left from the center, accept. This is to say that being against the European Union is a safe horse to ride- on to the polls.

The “two states solution” is out of the Israeli discourse in both 2019 election campaigns. No one is waiving this flag anymore. The solutions to the Israeli Palestinian conflict is willingly put on hold, ignored in (illusionary) anticipation for the exposure of the detailed Trump’s “Deal of the Century”.

Very few Israelis realize that all international agreements Israel signed refer to the ’67 borders only and fewer know that this applies to agreements signed by Netanyahu’s government and to the agreements reached and signed when Mr. Avigdor Liberman was the minister of foreign affairs!

It is safe to state that in Israeli eyes Brussels is the only international partner that seriously sticks the two states solution formula. Russia, China and even Arab leaders referring to it are perceived to pay lip service. In order to defuse this “threat” from Europe, Israel’s right aligned with extreme right wing politicians in EU. They coalesced under islamophobic rhetoric, whereby the tradeoff consists of Israel’s ignoring anti-Semitic tendencies or behavior by Eastern European in exchange for support of Israel’s occupation of Palestinian land.

When the 2015 refugee crisis hit Europe in parallel with ISIS terror attacks the Israeli public opinion despised the European leaders who welcomed many Muslim refugees into their countries and supported those who opposed it (It actually coincided with what is called the “Knife and Scissors intifada” of the Palestinians in Israel). Netanyahu seized the opportunity and cashed the early, non-governmental, investment of Israeli right and extreme right wing organizations in forming contacts and close relationships with European far-right and embraced far-right wing leaders. The main goal was and still is to drive a wedge within Europe to avoid consensus in European institutions on the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

This is the place to mention, again, that Israel depends economically on the European Union. EU Members states are Israel’s largest trade partner. Israel’s Export Institute’s data shows that in the first quarter of 2019, exports from Israel to the EU increased in 34% compared to 2018. European countries are the most popular tourist destination among Israelis. EU money

investments sponsor not only Palestinian projects but many scientific and development projects in Israel. The plan to offer Israel Preferred Partnership (PPP) as an incentive to find an agreeable political solution with the Palestinians faded, not to say has failed.

The decision of former labor Prime Minister and later Netanyahu's ally, Ehud Barak (77), to enter the race in aspiration to lead an alternative for Netanyahu on the left may still change the theme, but currently it seems that the fate of the Palestinian people and the continuous occupation will still be ignored during the September election campaign. Since, as far as we can anticipate, the US peace initiative has failed, the EU remains the "responsible adult" in the room.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the changes European voters' desire following the May EP elections. Nonetheless the mere desire for change can serve as an opportunity for the Commission to rethink and reflect on its policy towards Israel and the occupation.

These are the known parameters of the Trump-Netanyahu plan:

Partial annexation of the West Bank (Netanyahu referred to all Jewish settlements - "even the remotely secluded"); Full Israeli control of the Jordan valley; and Jerusalem as a united indivisible capital of Israel. These parameters will leave 2.5 million Palestinians incarcerated by Israel in the West Bank. The best case for them is a formation of a multinational state, which some right wingers say they are willing to accept, mainly because their demographic numbers are much lower, and they vow to make it worthwhile for the Palestinians to immigrate. The most probable status the Palestinians will get is 'enhanced economic freedom' combined with or limited self-governance. Some refer to it as 'autonomy plus', a certain form of upgraded economy. A formulation that fits with Jared Kushner's "Peace for Prosperity" vision and with the political views of all fragments in the center right Israeli party "Blue and White" who is doubted to repeat its remarkable performance in April election in the supplementary poll of September. This 'economical peace' is the most probable suggestion that will be offered to the Palestinians and reflects a form of Apartheid.

Despite all the current unknowns the generally perceived known is that Netanyahu's era is not over yet. He will get all the necessary support of Donald Trump and of Vladimir Putin and as

there is no viable alternative, he will continue to exploit the national resources in order to fight his own legal battles.

Europe has leverage over Israel, if it wants to, but up until now it seemed reluctant to use it. Officially, Israel still shares the universal values of the union and receives all the benefits. But having the full support of the Trump administration the Israeli government has diverted to unilateral moves on the ground that worsens the conditions of the Palestinians. As the candidate Netanyahu is getting more and more desperate, he may complicate the situation even more. It is thus for the European Union to rethink its approach towards Israel after the formation of the new government.

If the EU continues to ignore Israel's violations of its commitments, jeopardizing the two states solutions, it will be further regarded only as an unavoidable nuisance. The EU can use the economic leverage it has over Israel to try and force Israel to implement the shared values.

The European Union can reevaluate its position regarding the preferred mechanism to solve the 52 years occupation of the Palestinian people and review various other plans that were formulated in recent years that suggest equal coexistence without separation.

Europe should also decide how to approach Trump's deal of the century plan once it is released. Will it confront him on this issue as well, on top of the JCPOA? On this note, since he left the G-20 summit in Osaka, Trump declared that if Israelis and Palestinians won't reach a deal during his tenure "it will never happen"...