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Israel: Domestic Politics and the Israel-Palestine Arena

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Israel

During the years 2012-2014, Israel has experienced a period of relative stability, especially as compared to its immediate neighbours (Egypt, Syria and Lebanon), all of which have been impacted by the effects of the “Arab Spring,” pseudo-democratisation processes influenced by grassroots religious fundamentalist groups, and the resultant civil wars (Syria) or military takeovers (Egypt) of their respective countries. The economy continues to grow, and domestic politics is relatively stable and not about to undergo any short-term change, despite policies aimed at undermining both orthodox Jewish and Arab groups. On the peace front, and despite the intensive efforts of the United States administration, there has been little progress and the latest round of talks is in imminent danger of collapse.

Domestic Politics

Despite the traditional complexity of Israel's coalition governments, composed of many medium-sized parties, each of which has its own specific religious or political interests, Israel's current right-wing government has proved to be remarkably stable under the experienced, but hard-headed, leadership of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Given the fact that it is now much more difficult to bring a government down in a vote of no confidence than was previously the case, Netanyahu's administrations have

demonstrated a considerable longevity in comparison to previous Israeli government coalitions.

The recent law raising the lower election threshold to over 3% for the next elections will continue the trend towards governments composed of large and medium-sized parties, while the smaller parties with no more than 3-5 MPs each will disappear altogether, unless they unite on matters of common concern. This will particularly affect the fragmented political party structure amongst the religious and orthodox populations, as well as the many small Arab parties. The latter strongly oppose the new legislation, which they see as being aimed at excluding them from the Knesset, the Israeli parliament.

Two of the most influential parties in the present government coalition are the extreme right-wing Bayit Yehudi religious party, led by radical politician Naf-tali Bennett, and the Yisrael Beiteinu party, headed by Foreign Minister, and Russian immigrant, Avigdor Lieberman. Together with the right-wing Defence Minister, former Chief of Staff Bugi Yaalon, these government leaders have adopted extremist stances with respect to the Israel-Palestine conflict, to the extent of questioning the essence of the two-state solution. These leaders have gone so far as to criticise some of Israel's strongest allies, including the US administration, while adopting extremist anti-European positions.

Lieberman is but one of a growing number of Russian immigrants who have become active in Israeli politics and risen to high positions within government – including the new Knesset speaker Yuli Edelstein. Some commentators see this as underlying the anti-democratic tendencies within the government and the adoption of exclusive ultra-patriotic positions in what has always been an open country for debate. Many of these figures, who never experienced real democracy in their former lives in Russia,

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have been responsible for a process of increased delegitimisation of those groups promoting left-of-centre, pro-peace and pro-human rights positions. At one point in the 2012-13 period, this even extended to the activities of the government-appointed Council of Higher Education, responsible for the country's universities, which, under the guise of an academic quality assessment, attempted to close down one of the country's leading political science departments (the Department of Politics and Government at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, located in the southern city of Beer Sheva) due to what was seen as the politically "radical" views of some of its faculty members. They only backed down in the face of an international academic outcry, including by many important academic associations and universities with strong cooperative and collaborative scientific ties to the Israeli scientific community.

The main coalition partner, the Yesh Atid party headed by former newscaster Yair Lapid, has focussed on social and economic issues, while adopting a moderate, but by no means pro-peace, stance on the Israel-Palestine conflict (see below). In particular, Lapid has insisted on pushing through legislation that will force all ultra-religious males to complete their obligatory period of service in the army, as opposed to the current situation in which they are exempt from army service if they engage in full-time study in the Talmudic academies.

This move is viewed by the rapidly growing religious communities as crossing a red line, and it has met with significant opposition, both in the Knesset – where the orthodox parties are not part of the current right-wing government coalition – and in the public domain, with incidents of civil unrest and violent street demonstrations – spreading to orthodox communities elsewhere in the world, notably in New York and London. Nevertheless, this does not automatically mean that the orthodox parties will now be-

come potential coalition partners for the Labour Party and other parties of the left, most of whom support the army service legislation and are moreover perceived by the orthodox population as being too secular and even anti-religious in their worldviews.

The Labour Party ousted its leader Sheli Yehimovitch and elected in her place one of the princes of Israeli politics, Isaac (Buzi) Herzog. Herzog is the son of former Israeli President Chaim Herzog and the grandson of the first Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel, after whom he is named. Unlike Yehimovitch, he has held a number of important positions in previous governments, is much better acquainted with the international diplomatic, political and Jewish community, and is perceived by many as being a potential alternative leader if public opinion were to switch back from its current right-of-centre position to the centre or centre-left.

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The country's economic position remains strong. Close economic and commercial ties with both the US and the EU, and growing ties with Asia, indicate diversification. Israel continues to be a global leader in R&D in the sophisticated high-tech industry, as well as in the arms industry. The introduction of many new desalination plants in recent years has brought an end to the problem of water insecurity arising from continuous drought years, while the expansion of the road and rail systems is indicative of major investments in economic infrastructure for the country's future. In addition, the country's stock exchange has remained relatively stable and the local currency, the Israeli shekel, has remained strong against both the dollar and the euro.

The Israel-Palestine Conflict

At the time of writing (April 2014), the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority have all

but come to an end, following the failure of US Secretary of State John Kerry to bring the sides any closer together. Despite the fact that the Israeli team to the negotiations was headed by one of the more moderate government ministers, Justice Minister Zipi Livni, the two governments have demonstrated their inability to make any further meaningful compromises, even at the level of confidence-building measures (CBMs). For their part, the Palestinians have refused to accept the Israeli demand to publically recognise Israel as the bona fide State of the Jewish people, while Israel has negated any steps forward by automatically announcing new construction within West Bank settlements and by refusing, at the last minute, to honour its previous commitment to release a third batch of Palestinian prisoners.

Palestinian President Abu Mazen has suggested that the Palestinians will request full recognition from international organisations such as the UN, a move that has been seen by both Israel and the US as a breach of all previous understandings. In April 2014, the two main factions within Palestinian society – Fatah, headed by Abu Mazen, and the more radical Hamas movement, with its strong political and religious base in the Gaza Strip – reached a new understanding, another indication that the latest round of peace negotiations were close to collapsing. Israel's immediate response was to announce a suspension of the talks, which, in turn, was interpreted by the Palestinians as being no more than a convenient excuse on the part of Israel to find a way out of the negotiations.

Settlement activity in the West Bank continues unabated. As of 2014, there were over 300,000 Israeli residents in the West Bank, a figure that increases to over half a million if East Jerusalem is included. This has significantly impacted the thinking of the negotiators with respect to the ultimate demarcation of a boundary or border between Israel and a future Palestinian state. The Palestinian position is based on a return to the pre-1967 Green Line, the border that was drawn up between Israel and Jordan at the 1949 Rhodes Armistice Talks and which became the de facto border between Israel and the West Bank from that point on. For its part, and assuming that all Israeli settlements on the Palestinian side of the border would have to be evacuated, similar to what occurred in the Gaza Strip in 2005, Israel argues that this is impossible to implement and that

the many new settlement facts on the ground necessitate a new demarcation of a boundary to suit the present realities.

There has been some agreement concerning the re-drawing of the line in such a way that Israel would be able to retain some of the major settlement blocs – those closest to the Green Line – in exchange for agreeing to land swaps and territorial exchanges in other areas along the course of the border, such that the total areal extent of the Palestinian State would be equivalent to that of the original West Bank. More recently, in 2013 and 2014, a public discourse has also emerged on the possibility of some Israeli settlements remaining in situ on the “wrong” side of the border, constituting territorial exclaves within which residents would be citizens of Israel, while some Arab-Palestinian communities located inside Israel could enjoy the same status within a Palestinian state. While this is far from ideal, it does suggest the need to find alternative territorial solutions for the implementation of a two-state solution, due to the growing complexities and inability to resolve the issue with the demarcation of a single clean line of separation between the two political entities. The alternatives – the continuation of occupation, or the establishment of a single bi-national democratic state to include both Israel and the West Bank, are considered to be less amenable to any form of conflict resolution, even though neither would require drawing a boundary. While the idea of exclaves and cross-citizenship may, at this stage, appear to be fictional, it could provide an acceptable ethno-territorial arrangement should Israel refuse, or find it impossible, to evacuate the settlements even if a peace agreement were to be signed.

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At the time of writing, the potential for peace, or even for progress towards the next stage of conflict resolution, does not seem good. The US administration

is being criticised for not devoting its attention to other global issues, notably the recent Russian intervention in Crimea, but rather continuing to focus its main foreign policy agenda on Israel-Palestine. The fact that local leaders, especially certain senior Israeli politicians, are now prepared to publicly defy their main patron and superpower would seem to indicate that US influence in the region is weakening, a situation that could leave an even greater vacuum than the one that currently exists.

Israel and BDS

The past two years have seen a significant increase in acceptance of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign on the part of diverse organisations around the world. The movement has spread from academic and educational trade unions in Europe to a growing number of economic and cultural organisations. In reality, the media attention given to it is far greater than its actual impact, but Israeli policymakers have, nevertheless, become alarmed at the growing world debate on the topic. While Israel does not foresee any significant impact equal to that which affected the apartheid regime of South Africa, it is disquieted by the way in which the debate has been taken up by a variety of institutions around the world. The Israeli response of comparing anti-Israel boycotts to those practiced in Nazi Germany, or of automatically accusing anyone in favour of the boycott of anti-Semitism, has not been an effective strategy, as it avoids any discussion of the real political issues on the table, particularly as they relate to the plight and future political status of the Pales-

tinians. It is feared that, if and when the peace talks finally break down, Israel will be targeted as the scapegoat and that this will bring about an even greater increase in the level of global anti-Israel sentiment. To this end, the Ministry of Strategic Planning, in the Prime Minister's Office, has budgeted 100 million shekels for creating a counter strategy aimed at more proactively combating the BDS narrative around the globe.

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To counteract the effects of the movement, Israel has strengthened its economic, cultural and educational ties with many Asian countries, notably China, India and Korea, in addition to the strong ties it already enjoys with both North America and the EU countries. Some Israeli politicians see these new ties as indicative of the country's future economic development or even as an alternative to many of its traditional ties, should they be affected by the boycott. Amongst the large majority of Israelis, including those in the pro-peace camp, BDS is viewed as an anti-Israel movement, rooted in new forms of anti-Semitism, which will not bring about rapprochement between Israelis and Palestinians and will not serve the peace process in either the short or long term.