ISRAELI ELECTIONS: DOWN TO THE WIRE

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IsraelVotes2019 | The Elections and the Territories: Yisrael Medad, Fathom, Apr. 2019 — With only seven days left in the election campaign for the 21st Knesset, the future of the territories of Judea and Samaria (the West Bank) has been almost a non-issue since the Knesset dissolved itself at the end of December.

Benny Gantz to Tol: Future of Israel as a Democracy is at Stake in this Election: David Horovitz And Raoul Wootliff, Times of Israel, Apr. 3, 2019 — He was once a good leader of Israel. He has, in the past, done fine things for the country. But he has lost his way, dangerously. And for the sake of Israeli democracy, indeed for the sake of Israel’s very future, he cannot continue as prime minister.

With the Death of Bernard Lewis, the Age of Academic Giants Has Come to an End: Michael Doran, Mosaic, June 6, 2018 — As a graduate student at Princeton University in the mid-1990s, I grew to know and love Bernard Lewis, the preeminent historian of the Middle East who passed away on May 19, less than two weeks before his 102nd birthday.

On Topic Links:

IsraelVotes2019 | Israeli-Palestinian Relations and the 2019 Election: Jonathan Rynhold, Fathom, Mar. 2019 — For many years, the conflict with the Palestinians was central to Israeli elections. Candidates vigorously debated the rights and wrongs of the Oslo process, Palestinian statehood, settlements, unilateral withdrawals and various peace plans.

Young Israelis Want Netanyahu, Older Ones Gantz: The Times of Israel, Apr. 3, 2019 — Incumbent prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu is Israelis’ preferred candidate for premier over rival Benny Gantz, but not by much, a pre-election survey by the Israel Democracy Institute has found.

(or, “Identity”) party, told some 2,000 supporters in Tel Aviv Tuesday night not to trust those who say he’s made a deal with either of the front-running parties, as it is all “fake news.”

Netanyahu Fears Election Loss as Numbers Show Right-Wing Indifference: Batya Jeremberg, World Israel News, Apr. 4, 2019 — Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu sounded a loud warning to his base to get out and vote next week in an exclusive interview he granted Israel Hayom on Thursday. “We are very close to losing the battle,” he said. “We discovered a factor we did not notice until last night...that there is a reversal here of 2015.”

Can an Archaeological Dig Change the Future of Jerusalem? Bari Weiss, NYT, Mar. 30, 2019 — I want to tell you about a piece of clay the size of my pinkie fingernail and the color of ash. It is called a bulla, and it is what the people of the ancient Near East used before the invention of rubber bands or paper clips.

THE POLLS ARE TIGHT, BUT NETANYAHU IS STILL LIKELY TO SECURE ANOTHER TERM

Jonathan S. Tobin

National Review, Apr. 3, 2019

The Israeli people might be ready to rid themselves of Benjamin Netanyahu as their prime minister after ten years and three consecutive terms in office.

Netanyahu is headed into next week’s Knesset elections burdened by three pending corruption indictments and the ennui that any politician engenders after such a long career in the national spotlight. The Likud party leader’s problems are compounded by the fact that his chief rival, Benny Gantz, is widely respected and carries no political baggage. Gantz, a former chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces, heads a new coalition, the Blue and White party, which includes three former top Israeli generals as well as the country’s leading centrist party, headed by former journalist Yair Lapid.

Until a few weeks ago, Gantz’s Blue and White seemed perfectly situated to take advantage of Netanyahu’s legal woes and the collapse of the once-dominant Labor party. But with only a week to go before the voters make their choice, Gantz’s prospects have dimmed. While polls show that the Blue and White and Likud are
still locked in a tight race for first place in the multi-party election, even if his party wins the most seats in the next Knesset, Gantz’s chances of putting together a viable governing coalition appear to be remote. The variables involved in Israel’s complicated proportional-voting system will be decisive, and the most likely outcomes all involve Netanyahu remaining in power.

The key to understanding how Israel elects its leaders is in its proportional-voting scheme, which has voters cast one ballot choosing one party from a number of different options. Those parties among the many running for the Knesset that get at least 3.25 percent of the votes cast get a proportional share of the 120 seats in the parliament. But the latest polls give 14 separate parties, including the Likud and the Blue and White, a reasonable chance at getting past that mark, and no party in Israel's 70 years of independence has ever received a majority. Which means that winning the election is not so much a function of finishing first as it is of the ability to put together a 61-seat coalition. That's why Gantz’s chances of succeeding Netanyahu remain dismal despite his coalition’s small lead over Likud in the current average of major Israeli opinion polls.

As things stand now, the smaller far-right and religious parties that are aligned with Netanyahu and Likud stand to win anywhere from 63 to 69 seats. While only a quarter of Israelis are likely to choose the Likud, a clear majority will probably vote for either Netanyahu’s slate or one that is pledged to help him form a government. By contrast, Gantz seems to have no hope of amassing a coalition of like-minded or merely anti-Netanyahu parties that could get to 61 seats.

There’s no mystery about why Netanyahu and his allies are likely to amass a comfortable majority. While the corruption charges lodged against him would seem to be disqualifying, the prime minister’s supporters see them as either of negligible importance or politically motivated. No one can deny that under his stewardship, the country’s economy has grown and thrived. And most importantly, there is a consensus that stretches from the center-left to the center-right that his caution about the peace process is warranted.

Indeed, the reason why Blue and White has replaced the more left-wing Labor party as the main focus of opposition to Netanyahu is because Gantz’s stands on the peace process are virtually identical to those of the prime minister. Sure, there is widespread dissatisfaction with the status quo in the West Bank, but most Israelis believe that allowing an independent Palestinian state there would create a disaster akin to the one that unfolded after Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005...
The elections and the territories

Yisrael Medad

Fathom, Apr. 2019

With only seven days left in the election campaign for the 21st Knesset, the future of the territories of Judea and Samaria (the West Bank) has been almost a non-issue since the Knesset dissolved itself at the end of December. Even when it finally got a bit of public attention, it was due to the decision of US President Donald Trump to announce on 25 March that the US ‘recognises that the Golan Heights are part of the State of Israel’ and, understandably, questions were asked about whether this would affect policy towards the territories in the West Bank.

To date, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has made only one high-profile visit to a West Bank community, my home village of Shiloh, (although even then it was only to the archaeological Tel with former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee rather than to the community itself.) He did make shiva / consolation visits to the families of West Bank terror victims, as did President Reuven Rivlin. And he also conducted a business meeting with heads of regional and municipal councils. But this was a closed session and was more a report on Netanyahu’s government’s achievements in resettling Jews in their national homeland. A perfunctory summary statement referred to the prime minister saying he was ‘working on empowering Israel in the arena of security, economics and diplomacy’. Why has the issue of the territories, with over 450,000 Jewish residents, been so little discussed?

One possible reasoning for the low-profile is that, quite simply, most of the parties, except for the extreme Left and the Arab lists, all support - whether fully or partially - the idea that Jews belong in Judea and Samaria and believe that all or most of them should stay within blocs or some other arrangement. In other words, from Netanyahu to Benny Gantz, Labor leader Avi Gabbay to New Right leader Naftali Bennett, Jews remaining in their communities is a general consensus item.

While I’m not a fan of surveys - it is often the formulation of the question that
influences the results - a Haaretz poll from 5 March found that 42 per cent of Israelis support partial annexation - rather than some vague retention - of the West Bank (a figure that also includes those who support a two-state solution!) According to the poll, 34 per cent support a two-state solution, which only three parties openly promote. Oddly enough, 20 per cent of non-Jews support complete annexation of the West Bank.

Why is this the case? Firstly, Israel has administered the territories for almost 52 years. Not only first-time voters, but a good proportion of their parents have not known any other reality. Secondly, the Arab rejection of any sensible peace arrangement negotiations, their unyielding negation of Jewish national identity and incitement campaigns, and the ‘pay-for slay’ terrorism pension support all point to a serious security threat and a sense of uselessness on Israel's part to try to assuage this Arab negativism. Even among many left-of-centre Israelis, the idea that dismantling communities in the West Bank would solve the conflict (rather than making them feel more ethical and acceptable in liberal and progressive circles), is becoming increasingly difficult to convincingly argue.

This support for settlements exists despite the fact that parties to the right of the Likud have been promoting the extension of partial sovereignty to Area C as well as below-the-surface severe criticism of Netanyahu for reduced construction, removal of several outpost communities and neighbourhoods, and his perceived failure to confront the lopsided legal obstructionism. Netanyahu’s unwillingness to remove the EU-promoted Khan al-Ahmar Bedouin encampment was even an object of ads in the press. All of this means that if the Likud does form the next governing coalition, pressure surrounding these issues will be brought to bear in the coalition talks with the various parties, especially the United Right list ... [To read the full article, click the following LINK - Ed.]

BENNY GANTZ TO TOL: FUTURE OF ISRAEL AS A DEMOCRACY IS AT STAKE IN THIS ELECTION

David Horovitz and Raoul Wootliff

Times of Israel, Apr. 3, 2019

He was once a good leader of Israel. He has, in the past, done fine things for the country. But he has lost his way, dangerously. And for the sake of Israeli
democracy, indeed for the sake of Israel’s very future, he cannot continue as prime minister.

So said Benny Gantz on Tuesday evening about the man whose job he is determined to win: Benjamin Netanyahu.

Interviewed by The Times of Israel in his campaign office in north Tel Aviv, the Blue and White leader framed next week’s elections in the starkest of terms: a binary choice between the Zionist vision of a democratic and secure Jewish state under his leadership, and a rapid spiral under Netanyahu toward a version of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s Turkey — with a leader who won’t budge and who gradually brings the judges, the cops, and the press under his enforced control.

Netanyahu’s determination to hold on to power at all costs, Gantz asserted, has come to threaten Israel’s very democracy — with the courts, law enforcement and the media all the focus of his sustained attack. The once admirable prime minister, blighted by the sheer length of his time in office, Gantz said, has become obsessed with his own political survival to the point where he poses a danger to the future of the country he has led for the past decade.

Awkward and sometimes rather wooden in his public appearances, Gantz in a more intimate setting exuded both seriousness and urgency. “We are speaking about a corrupt man who is destroying the country,” Gantz proclaimed of Netanyahu within minutes of the start of the interview, in which he used both carefully crafted lines familiar from his stump speeches and earnest, instinctive expressions of exasperation.

That accusation is a damning one by a candidate who has promised to be a “positive alternative” to the current divisive leadership, and who launched his political career in January vowing to keep to the high ground and eschew political mudslinging.

Three months on, hardened by the fierce campaign Netanyahu has waged against his own former IDF chief, the 1.95-meter-tall (nearly 6 foot 5) Gantz acknowledged unhappily that he is occasionally forced to “bend down to him to engage in the battle” but still believes Israel deserves a cleaner political discourse. The campaigns have seen daily below-the-belt attacks, including a newspaper report last week highlighted by the rival Likud campaign that alleged that Gantz had sought psychological counseling when he ended his 38-year military career. (Later
Tuesday evening, at an English-language event in front of 1,000 people across town hosted by *The Times of Israel* and the Tel Aviv International Salon, Gantz would dismiss that claim as a “pure lie” while garnering warm applause for evincing understanding and empathy for people who do need such help.)

Gantz insisted that he has nothing personal against the prime minister. But ultimately, in his telling, what Israel is witnessing with Netanyahu now is the corrosive impact of a premier who has spent far too long in power.

Therefore, if elected prime minister, Gantz, 58, promised he will pass legislation mandating a two-term prime ministerial limit. If he wins next Tuesday, he is determined, unlike previous prime ministers, he said, not to give in to the delusion that the country’s very existence depends on him retaining the post, and that all means can be sacrificed to that end.

In his most devastating criticism, Gantz said that Netanyahu’s approval for Germany to sell advanced submarines to Egypt several years ago, which has been tied to a corruption scandal that has snared several of the prime minister’s associates but so far not Netanyahu himself, “could endanger the country.”

With his Blue and White in charge, Gantz claimed, things will be different. And even though some recent polls show Netanyahu’s Likud just ahead of the newly formed centrist party, and the surveys generally show Likud likely to form a coalition, Gantz was adamant that he will helm the next government ... [To read the full article, click the following LINK - Ed.]

WITH THE DEATH OF BERNARD LEWIS,

THE AGE OF ACADEMIC GIANTS HAS COME TO AN END

*Michael Doran*

*Mosaic, June 6, 2018*

As a graduate student at Princeton University in the mid-1990s, I grew to know and love Bernard Lewis, the preeminent historian of the Middle East who passed away on May 19, less than two weeks before his 102nd birthday. At the time, I was in my early thirties and he was a year or two short of eighty, though you would not have known it from the pace of his work—a pace with
which I soon became familiar as his research assistant.

By then I had met any number of extremely accomplished people, but never anyone quite like him. Lewis was a genius, by which I mean not just that he was extremely intelligent but that he possessed dazzling and unique intellectual gifts. He knew somewhere between ten and fifteen languages. The ones that mattered most to him professionally—Arabic, Hebrew, Farsi, modern Turkish, Ottoman Turkish, French, and German—he knew extremely well. He also had a photographic memory.

Near-perfect recall is an impressive instrument, though it entails its own peculiar complications. One day, Lewis handed me a manuscript of his new book, The Middle East: A Brief History of the Last 2,000 Years. He asked me to proofread it and to be on the lookout, especially, for repetitions—not just within the text but also between it and his other publications. Edward Said, the author of Orientalism and Lewis’s nemesis and bête noire, had accused him of “recycling old notes.” Lewis had no wish to turn Said into a truth-teller.

No sooner had I begun my work than I discovered a passage that had appeared, verbatim, in an article written by Lewis some two decades earlier. Was Said correct, then, and was Lewis cutting and pasting from earlier work? This I knew to be false. Lewis didn’t write books in the conventional sense of the word “write.” He would collect primary sources, organize them into manila folders—a separate one dedicated to each chapter in the book under construction. Then he would sit comfortably in the chair at his desk and speak into the Dictaphone. Out they would flow—perfectly formed sentences. Uninterrupted by so much as an “uh” or an “umm,” they would soon turn into neat paragraphs, and the paragraphs would grow into chapters. A light editing after dictation was sometimes all it took to ready the material for publication. If Lewis sometimes repeated himself verbatim, it was because ideas that he had formulated over the years were simply engraved in granite in his mind.

At our next meeting, I showed Lewis the repeated passage. He turned beet red and quickly changed the subject. When on a later occasion I tried to discuss the subject of his phenomenal recall, it was plain my questions irritated him. So, I never broached the topic again—but I did once ask if he’d ever experienced writer’s block. “Rarely,” he said. “However, I am occasionally at a loss for the right word.” He had a method for overcoming this ordeal. “I draw myself a hot bath, ease down into the water, put my head back and relax. And then it comes to
To call him prolific is an understatement. Wikipedia’s list of his books runs to 33 titles ranging across all periods of Islamic history. The list, however, is incomplete. Among the omissions is Days in Denmark, a lighthearted guidebook published in 1950 under the pseudonym Louis Bernard; alongside its voluminous information and advice, the book pokes fun at the foibles of the Danes. I’d discovered it by chance one day while puttering around in his study. After skimming through it, marveling as I read, I brought it to him fully expecting a show of pride at his command of so offbeat a subject. To my surprise, he was unforthcoming...

“You even know Danish?” I asked, brandishing the book.

“Where did you find that?”

“Over there on the shelf. Did you work on Denmark during the war?” (He had served in British intelligence.)

“No.”

“What prompted you to learn Danish?”

“Personal reasons,” he said, taking the book from my hand... [To read the full article, click the following LINK – Ed.]

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