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ISRAEL'S ELECTION

DEMOCRACY STRONG AS NETANYAHU WIN IN OFFING — IRAN REMAINS KEY, OBAMA, EUROPEAN PRESSURES LOOM

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Unseating Netanyahu a Tricky Game: [Matthew Fisher, *Postmedia News*, Jan. 20, 2013](#)—Having led every poll taken from the beginning to the end of a national election campaign that has lasted for months, Benjamin Netanyahu appears poised to be re-elected as Israel's prime minister on Tuesday. But in Israel, where any of the 34 parties that are contesting the election get more than two per cent of the vote gets seats in the Knesset, election day is the first part of what is a long, tortuous electoral dance.

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MAKING CONSERVATIVE CHOICES

David M. Weinberg

[*Jerusalem Post*, Jan. 20, 2013](#)

Israelis will elect a conservative government this week because they think it prudent to do so, not because they are “turning inwards” or backwards or developing anti-democratic tendencies. They want Binyamin Netanyahu, not Tzipi Livni (or Shimon Peres, or any other candidate of the Left), to lead the

country, because caution – not hollow and unsubstantiated hope – is the prevailing watchword. It's important to say these things, because in the global punditocracy there is an inaccurate narrative taking root, to wit Netanyahu's reelection means that Israel being overrun by Right-wing and religious fanatics, and that it is choosing isolationism over opportunities for peace.

In fact, clever pundits like David Remnick of *The New Yorker* and Ari Shavit of *Haaretz* have tried to portray the current Israeli election campaign as a historic choice between two competing narratives: that of the isolationist-nationalist Israeli Right, and the liberal-democratic-peace-seeking Israeli Left. But these brainy journalists are all-too-slick and only superficially sophisticated. The dichotomous moment they have summoned-forth is false, and their reading of Israeli society and polity is terribly off-base. Very few Israelis see things the way Remnick and Shavit do.

Israelis don't see themselves as standing at a historic juncture. They don't believe that Middle East circumstances are ripe for peace. Given Oslo's sorry 20-year record, they are indeed wary of Palestinian statehood. They know that withdrawal from the West Bank at present would be suicide, given the Islamic blitzkrieg across the Mideast, along with Abbas' weakness and Hamas' ascendancy in the Palestinian arena. They still pine for peace, but given the situation in Sinai, Gaza, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Iran (and Ramallah), sadly they expect conflict.

And so, the Israeli public overwhelmingly does not buy the well worn argument, advanced obstinately by the Left and the international community, that the peace process is stuck because of settlements or lack of Israeli diplomatic flexibility. They simply feel that caution militates against dramatic diplomatic moves at this time. They are waiting-out the Arab Spring and other storms, taking no irresponsible risks, and voting for steady hands at the helm of state.

That is why Tzipi Livni's "I can bring the peace" messaging never took hold during the current campaign. It is important to reiterate that Israelis are not becoming callously defiant of the world and the Palestinians, nor wildly "annexationist." They are not making a grand choice this week between good and evil, between peace and war, between liberalism and fascism. They are simply choosing responsible government. And what they assume will emerge from the election is a go-slow Netanyahu government with parties of both the Zionist Right and Left; another complicated coalition government, with built-in checks and balances.

One thing is for sure: Israelis don't buy the doomsday scenarios drawn by Remnick and Shavit, or by some Diaspora Jewish leaders like Eric Yoffie of the Reform movement or Daniel Sokatch of the New Israel Fund, about Israel forfeiting its democracy, becoming a Spartacus state, or losing its global friends.

So why the apocalyptic analyses? Unfortunately, I sense that the Israeli and American-Jewish ideological Left has gone stir-crazy with Netanyahu hatred. They can't accept the fact that the political Left's 20-year-long crusade for Palestinian statehood has been proven bankrupt; they can't stand the fact Netanyahu is going to be reelected; and they are setting a trap in which to bring him crashing down.

By positing that Israel is at an apocalyptic crossroads, and that Israel is pig-headedly making wrong and dangerous choices, the stage is set for "wiser" actors to intervene "to save Israel in spite of itself." This is the upshot of Jeffrey Goldberg's celebrated Bloomberg News column, in which he describes the lack of trust and frustration in the White House concerning Netanyahu. Netanyahu just "doesn't understand what Israel's best interests are," Goldberg has Obama saying, and "his conduct will drive Israel into grave international isolation."

With such isolation, even from the United States, Israel won't survive, Goldberg (or Obama) opines. "Israel's own behaviour poses a long-term threat to its existence." Therefore, real friends have to step in to save Israel from itself, by imposing a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – which is the swift establishment of a full-fledged Palestinian state. For Israel's own good, of course.

Like Peter Beinart before him, Goldberg says that Obama is not going to directly pressure Israel on this matter, and this seems correct. Instead, Obama has outsourced the Palestinian issue to the Europeans. Europe is going to take the lead in wedging Israel into a corner against its own self-perceived interests (but in reality "for its own good") – with Obama "leading from behind." This explains the overwhelming European vote at UN in November in favor of upgrading the status of "Palestine," even though Washington was opposed (at least in public) to the move and voted against it.

Nevertheless, Obama didn't seem too upset with the Europeans for voting against Israel and the US. Like I said, it's called outsourcing the pressure on Israel to Europe. The next European move (with Obama "leading from behind") will be an attempt to impose an internationalized framework for Israeli-Palestinian talks with terms of reference that basically settle everything in advance in favour of the Palestinians (1967 lines, etc.) The Palestinians will be forgiven for their unwillingness to enter direct and unconditional negotiations with Israel. Europe will dispense with insistence on that venerable principle of the peace process. After all, they no longer trust Israel to do what is in its own best interests (to withdraw), even if there were direct talks.

So best just get on with it and impose the outlines of a "settlement" in indirect consultations or an international forum. And besides, the main point of the process will not be real negotiations or true peace, but the dethroning of Netanyahu.

The author is director of public affairs at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies,

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WEAK NETANYAHU FINISH SUGGESTS UNWIELDY COALITION

Joshua Mitnick

[Wall Street Journal](#), Jan 18, 2013

There is little question Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud Party will emerge at the head of a ruling coalition when Israelis vote in nationwide elections on Tuesday. But polls also show his campaign is limping to the finish line amid falling support, which is likely to leave him weakened and heading a coalition more fragile than the current one....

One coalition possibility is an alliance with centrist parties that could push for domestic economic reforms and also support diplomacy with the Palestinians. That would be a salve to Mr. Netanyahu, who is grappling with a looming fiscal austerity plan and increased international isolation, including strained ties with President Barack Obama.

But the most apparent option—easier to form, but more challenging to govern—would be a far-right coalition that opposes a Palestinian state. Such a coalition would likely be more fractious and unstable than the current multiparty coalition led by Mr. Netanyahu's center-right Likud Party and the ultranationalist Yisrael Beiteinu party, which with smaller religious and far-right parties currently controls 66 of the Knesset's 120 seats.

Following Tuesday's vote, should Mr. Netanyahu's bloc add the projected seats of four smaller right-wing and religious parties, it would maintain its 66-seat majority, according to a Smith Institute poll for the Israeli financial daily Globes. Some five center-left parties would control 44 seats, according to

the poll, and Arab-Israeli parties would control 10 seats. Other polls have shown a religious-right bloc could hold from 63 to 69 seats.

Mr. Netanyahu's re-election bid has been bolstered by the lack of any formidable rival and a fragmented center-left opposition. His campaign ads tout him as a strong leader keeping the Jewish state stable amid regional turmoil. For the most part, the opposition has shied away from challenging his assertions that the Palestinians are to blame for the peace-process impasse, and that Arab Spring tumult demands that Israel approach new concessions with skepticism. "The major macro issues aren't being debated here to the point that it might have been, if you had two popular leaders from major parties," said Amir Mizroch, the editor of the English edition of *Israel Hayom*.

The closest challenger is Labor Party chairwoman Shelly Yachimovitch, whose party would capture about half as many seats as Mr. Netanyahu's Likud, according to the polls. A former television and radio host, Ms. Yachimovich has struggled to persuade the Israeli electorate that she is qualified to be prime minister. She has vowed not to join a government led by Mr. Netanyahu. Her support has been eroded by two center-left parties. One is led by Tzipi Livni, the former foreign minister who has made restarting peace talks the center of her campaign. A second, headed by former news anchor Yair Lapid, has also skirted foreign policy. The three camps have sparred over whether to form a collective front to face Mr. Netanyahu.

Center-left parties are largely to blame for the absence of a foreign-policy debate, said Ari Shavit, a columnist at the liberal *Ha'aretz* paper. These parties, he said, have focused on domestic issues rather than formulating a fresh pitch on peace. "The old peace ideology collapsed, and it was never replaced," he said....

Polls show Mr. Netanyahu is losing support to politicians on the right. His merged party slate with Avigdor Lieberman—who stepped down from his post as foreign minister just last month after a fraud indictment—is running at about 15% below the parties' current 42 seats in the outgoing parliament, polls show. The beneficiaries have included the pro-settler Jewish Home party and its charismatic leader, Naftali Bennett, who opposes a Palestinian state and supports annexation of most of the West Bank.

Although a coalition of Likud-Beiteinu, Jewish Home, Shas and United Torah Judaism would be the easiest option for Mr. Netanyahu, "few in the political establishment are willing to bet on this outcome, mainly because with this composition, it will be impossible to pass a dramatic budget cut, to pass new laws on equally sharing the burden [created for subsidies and draft exemptions for the ultra-Orthodox] and to respond to the international pressure on holding negotiations with the Palestinians," wrote Zeev Kam, in the *Maariv* newspaper.

Such a coalition could also make it difficult for Mr. Netanyahu to find common ground among a large number of parties, especially among foreign-policy moderates queasy about joining a hard-line coalition. "Netanyahu called elections, but he might end up with a worse situation than he ended walking out of, with less power than he had in the last government," said Reuven Hazan, a political-science professor at Hebrew University.

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UNSEATING NETANYAHU A TRICKY GAME

Matthew Fisher,

[Postmedia News](#), Jan. 20, 2013

Having led every poll taken from the beginning to the end of a national election campaign that has lasted for months, Benjamin Netanyahu appears poised to be re-elected as Israel's prime minister on Tuesday. But in Israel, where any of the 34 parties that are contesting the election get more than two per cent of the vote gets seats in the Knesset, election day is the first part of what is a long, tortuous electoral dance. What follows will be days and perhaps weeks of horse trading as Netanyahu scrambles to find the numbers to form a stable right-wing or centre-right coalition government from among the eight or nine parties expected to win more than a few of the parliament's 120 seats.

"Even if he is re-elected, what kind of a coalition will Netanyahu have? What kind of coalition can he build?" asked Eytan Gilboa, director of Bar-Ilan University. "I think he will have a rough time of it because his position will probably not be as strong as it was in the last election. At the end of the negotiations Netanyahu may find himself in a weak, problematic position."

Polls taken last week indicated that the 63-year-old Netanyahu, his right-wing Likud Party and its strongly nationalist partners, Yisrael Beiteinu, led by [former] Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman and strongly backed by Israel's one million Russians, have been losing support. Nevertheless, the partners were still expected to end up on top. A poll by the *Ha'aretz* daily gave them as many as 32 seats. Labour, whose leader Shelly Yacimovich has already declared her party will not be part of a Netanyahu-led coalition, was a distant second with about 17 seats....

What really matters on election night is how the right-wing religious bloc stacks up against the centre-left-Arab bloc. Polling has suggested that the right-left split may be closer than seemed likely a few months ago. If the pollsters are right, Netanyahu and his likely coalition members appear set to control 63 seats to about 57 seats for the opposition.

The biggest election-day drama may turn out to be the size of the bite taken out of Likud's vote by the hard right, Jewish Home Party (Bayit Yehudi). It is a new party led by Naftali Bennett, a charismatic 40-year-old newcomer to electoral politics who lived for several years as a young boy in Montreal where, according to *Ha'aretz*, he and his family became religiously observant. Some years after returning to Israel he became a special forces officer and war hero in Lebanon. After that he became a high-tech millionaire. Between 2006 and 2008 he served as Netanyahu's chief of staff before the two men had a falling out that was never fully explained by either but has been the subject of considerable media speculation.

"I think Bennett is real. The question is how many seats is he going to get and how many votes will he take away from Netanyahu," said Gilboa. "Bennett has adopted a clever election strategy. He says Netanyahu will be prime minister. I will support him and join his coalition. But he is also suggesting that he will constrain Netanyahu. "It has been effective so far. Likud has attacked Bennett lately because it has become concerned by him. It may harm Netanyahu, but that will not effect the right-wing bloc that much because the right-wing vote stays in the bloc."

Bennett has outflanked Netanyahu, who also had a distinguished military record in the special forces, by being even stronger than his former boss on what many Israelis regard as the core issue of retaining West Bank settlements. Sensing the political danger posed by Bennett, who had said he wants to be "a third hand on the wheel" on the wheel of Netanyahu's coalition government, the prime minister told the *Jerusalem Post* that "you know that you have to have two steady hands of one driver on the wheel, and if you have other people grab the wheel, pretty soon the car overturns."

The future of the settlements, the lack of peace talks with Palestinians and the issue of whether Israel should attack Iran's nuclear programme may have vexed U.S. President Barack Obama and the Jewish Diaspora in the United States. Opponents and some columnists in Israel have severely criticized Netanyahu for baldly appearing to back Obama's Republican challenger, Mitt Romney, in last fall's

American elections. Furthermore, the Israeli media have made much of private remarks allegedly made by Obama to the effect that Netanyahu was “moving his country down a path towards near-total isolation,” by approving the further expansion of a major settlement near Jerusalem....

Sensing an opportunity at the other end of the political spectrum, Bennett has run front-page ads saying, “as Israel faces unparalleled international pressure, Prime Minister Netanyahu will need a large Bayit Yehudi (Jewish Home) by his side.” But none of this appears to have made much of a difference to many voters. Their leading concerns have been with the growing deficit, education, health, social justice, the cost of housing, high taxes and the economy generally.

Labour has, with some success, stayed clear of such issues as national security and foreign affairs, which usually figure prominently in Israeli elections. They have stressed economic issues. But this can be a tricky game. Whatever Netanyahu’s weaknesses because he is too strong or too soft on issues involving the Palestinians and the Iranians, he has presided over one of the world’s more successful economies at a time when many countries have dire economic problems.

As politicians elsewhere have learned again and again, it is difficult to unseat an incumbent when the economy is doing well.

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ON TOPIC

Israeli Electoral Politics – A Guide for the Perplexed: Gil Hoffman, *Jerusalem Post*, Jan. 10, 2013—There was good news and bad news this week for Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. On the one hand, a failed effort by former foreign minister Tzipi Livni to begin a process intended to unite the three parties on the Center-Left after the January 22 election helped Netanyahu’s Likud Beytenu stop its tailspin in the polls and win back two seats it had lost to its satellite parties.

Zionism’s New Boss: Liel Leibovitz, *Tablet Magazine*, Jan. 14, 2013—Under rookie politician Naftali Bennett, religious Zionism is finally becoming Israel’s political mainstream. Naftali Bennett’s press conference late last month was to the Israeli election cycle what a high-speed car chase is to a middling Hollywood action movie. With the chronicle of Bibi Netanyahu’s re-election more or less foretold, Israelis were vying for a shot of adrenaline that would rescue what had otherwise become a bloodless procedural, and Bennett was on hand to deliver.

A Far-Right Israeli Electorate?: Lee Smith, *Tablet Magazine*, Jan. 16, 2013—Perhaps Bibi’s infamous bluster has had its purpose. While his belligerent rhetoric unnerves his many critics, including world leaders, it’s helped keep Israel out of armed conflict. He has presided over more economic success and less war than almost any other Israeli leader in history.

Netanyahu Coalition Forming Dilemmas: Joseph Puder, *Front Page Magazine*, Jan. 21, 2013—The question Israeli political pundits ask regarding the upcoming January 22, 2013 Knesset (parliamentary) elections is not what party will be asked by President Shimon Peres to form the next government, nor are they asking who will be the next Prime Minister of Israel. The operative question is which parties will join Netanyahu’s Likud-Beitenu to form the next coalition government. The answer to that will determine the direction and the likely policies of the next Netanyahu government.

PA Hopes Syrian 'Red Herring' Discredits Netanyahu at Polls: Chana Ya'ar, *Israel National News*, Jan. 21, 2013—On the eve of Israel’s national elections, Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas is doing his best to discredit Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, claiming the Netanyahu government approved entry of 150,000 Syrian refugees into Judea and Samaria.

The Bennett Threat – and Why The Poles Are Scared: Moshe Dann, *Jerusalem Post*, Dec. 31, 2012—Naftali Bennett is a product of Israeli society; articulate and smart, a Sayeret Matkal veteran, he’s an insider that understands what’s going on. He is also a financial success. But that is not what makes him dangerous to the establishment. The threat he poses stems not so much from his ideology, but rather from the fact that that he actually has one, that he articulates what he believes and stands for.

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