Israel: Political Development and Data for 2018

EMMANUEL NAVON[1] & ABRAHAM DISKIN[2]

[1] *Tel Aviv University and Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya, Israel;* [2] *The Academic Center of Science and Law, Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel*

Introduction

In 2018, Israel held municipal elections and the *Knesset* dissolved itself. The coalition government of Benjamin Netanyahu shrank to a razor-thin majority following the resignation of Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman over a controversial ceasefire reached with Hamas after a barrage of rockets fired from the Gaza Strip. Israel was challenged by Hamas in the south (border trespassing, missiles and incendiary devices), by Hezbollah in the north (tunnels), by Iran's growing military presence in Syria and by recurrent terrorist attacks in the West Bank. At the same time, its international relations and economy continued to improve. Police investigations of the prime minister over suspicions of corruption and breach of trust continued to make headlines.

Election report

Israel held municipal elections in October (with a runoff in November for candidates who did not get 40 percent of the vote) for its 77 cities, 124 local councils and 54 regional councils. In Jerusalem, Moshe Lion (endorsed by the Likud party) won with a narrow majority of 50.85 percent in the runoff against Ofer Berkowitz, a young and independent candidate. In Tel Aviv, the incumbent Ron Huldai (Labour Party) was re-elected with 46.86 percent of the vote. In Haifa, the incumbent Yona Yahav (endorsed by the centrist Yesh Atid party) was defeated by Einat Kalisch-Rotem (endorsed by the Labour Party) with 56.21 percent of the vote. Kalish-Rotem became the first female mayor of one of Israel's three largest cities.

The *Knesset*, which was elected in March 2015, was dissolved on 26 December (see Cabinet report below).

Cabinet report

In November, Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman resigned from the government to protest what he called a humiliating ceasefire between Israel and Hamas. As Lieberman pulled his 'Israel Beitenu' party from the coalition government, Prime Minister Netanyahu's parliamentary majority shrank from 66 to 61 (out of 120 *Knesset* seats). Netanyahu originally vowed to maintain his coalition despite its razor-thin majority, but he eventually called (in December) a snap election scheduled for 9 April 2019.

Table 1. Cabinet composition of Netanyahu IV in Israel in 2018

Duration of Cabinet	Inception	14 May 2015	Dissolution	Still in office at the end of 2018
Period covered by table	From	1 January 2018	Until	31 December 2018
Type of Cabinet	Oversized coalition (OC)			

A. Party/gender composition on 1 January 2018	Seats in Cabinet		Seats held by women		Seats in Parliament	
	N	%	N	% of party	N	%
Likud	12	54.5%	2	16.7%	30	25.0%
Kulanu	3	13.6%	0	0.0%	10	8.3%
Jewish Home	3	13.6%	1	33.3%	8	6.7%
Shas	2	9.1%	0	0%	7	5.8%
Israel Our Home	2	9.1%	1	50.0%	5	4.2%
United Torah Judaism	0	0%	0	–	6	5.0%
Totals	22	100%	4	18.2%	66	55.0%

B. Composition of Netanyahu IV Cabinet on 1 January 2017 See previous edition of the Political Data Yearbook for Israel or http://politicaldatayearbook.com

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C. Changes in composition of Netanyahu IV Cabinet during 2018

Ministerial title	Outgoing minister	Outgoing date	Incoming minister	Comments
Minister of Defense	Avigdor Liberman (1958, male, Israel Our Home)	18 November 2018	Benjamin Netanyahu (1949, male, Likud)	Prime Minister Netanyahu continued to hold his other posts
Minister of Immigration and Absorption	Sofa Landver (1949, female, Israel Our Home)	18 November 2018	Benjamin Netanyahu (1949, male, Likud)	Prime Minister Netanyahu continued to hold his other posts. He ceased to serve as Minister of Immigration and Absorption on 24 December and the post remained vacant until 9 January 2019
Minister of Religious Serviced	David Azoulai (1954, male, Shas)	30 November 2018	Aryeh Machluf Deri (1959, male, Shas)	David Azoulai died on 30 November. Aryeh Machluf Deri served as acting Minister of Religious Services between 14 November and 31 December, and the post remained vacant until 1 January 2019

Table 1. Continue

D. Party/gender composition on 31 December 2017	Seats in Cabinet		Seats held by women		Seats in Parliament	
	N	%	N	% of party	N	%
Likud	12	63.2%	2	16.7%	30	25.0%
Kulanu	3	15.8%	0	0.0%	10	8.3%
Jewish Home	3	15.8%	1	33.3%	8	6.7%
Shas	1	5.3%	0	0%	7	5.8%
United Torah Judaism	0	0%	0	–	6	5.0%
Totals	19	100%	3	15.8%	61	50.8%

Sources: *Knesset* (http://www.knesset.gov.il); Diskin and Podoksik (2016); Navon and Diskin (2018); and information supplied by the secretary of the government.

Parliament report

Nine members of the *Knesset* (MKs) were replaced in 2018. In February, Wael Younis (from the 'Joint List') replaced Youssef Atauna in accordance with the party's rotation agreement; Pnina Tamano-Shata (from the 'Yesh Atid' party) replaced Ya'acov Peri, who resigned after a media investigation revealed he had lied about his military service; Danny Saida (from the 'shas' party) replaced Yitzhak Cohen, who resigned from the *Knesset* following his appointment as a Cabinet minister; Yinon Azoulay (from the 'shas' party) replaced David Azoulay, who resigned from the *Knesset* for health reasons. In July, the leader of the opposition, Yitzhak Herzog, resigned from the *Knesset* after being elected chairman of the Jewish Agency. His position was not filled by the chairman of the Labor Party, Avi Gabbay, since Gabbay is not a member of *Knesset*. Tzipi Livni (number two on the 'Zionist Camp' list, a union between Labor and Livni's 'Hatnuah' party) was appointed by Gabbay as leader of the opposition. Herzog's MK seat was filled by Robert Tiviaev. In July, Wael Younis (from the 'Joint List') was himself replaced by Niven Abu Rahmoun according to the party's rotation agreement. In August, Moshe Mizrahi (from the 'Zionist Camp' list) replaced Zouheir Bahloul, who resigned to protest the legislation of the 'nation-state law' (See Institutional change report below). In November, Osnat Mark (from the 'Likud' party) replaced Jackie Levy after the latter was elected Mayor of Beit She'an in Israel's municipal elections; and Avigdor Lieberman (from the 'Israel Beitenu' party) regained his *Knesset* seat upon his resignation as defence minister (his temporary replacement had been Yulia Malinovsky).

Political party report

In March, Tamar Zanberg was elected chairwoman of 'Meretz', an opposition party that held five seats in the 2018 *Knesset*.

Institutional change report

In July, the *Knesset* passed a basic law that codifies Israel's status as the nation-state of the Jewish people. This basic law is Israel's 14th. Those basic laws collectively constitute a de

Table 2. Party and gender composition of Parliament (*Knesset*) in Israel in 2018

| | 1 January 2018 | | | | 31 December 2018 | | | |
| | All | | Women | | All | | Women | |
Party	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Likud	30	25.0%	7	23.3%	30	25.0%	8	26.7%
Zionist Union	24	20.0%	9	37.5%	24	20.0%	9	37.5%
Joint List	13	10.8%	2	15.4%	13	10.8%	3	23.1%
Yesh Atid	11	9.2%	3	27.3%	11	9.2%	4	36.4%
Kulanu	10	8.3%	4	40.0%	10	8.3%	4	40.0%
Jewish Home	8	6.7%	2	25.0%	8	6.7%	2	25.0%
Shas	7	5.8%	0	0%	7	5.8%	0	0%
United Torah Judaism	6	5.0%	0	0%	6	5.0%	0	0%
Israel Our Home	5	4.2%	2	40.0%	5	4.2%	1	20.0%
Meretz	5	4.2%	2	40.0%	5	4.2%	2	40.0%
Single MK – Orly Levi-Abeksis	1	0.8%	1	100%	1	0.8%	1	100%
Totals	120	100%	32	26.7%	120	100%	34	28.3%

Sources: Israel Central Election Committee (http://www.votes20.gov.il); *Knesset* (http://www.knesset.gov.il).

Table 3. Changes in political parties in Israel in 2018

A. Party institutional changes in 2018
None

B. Party leadership changes in 2018
Tamar Zanberg (1976, female, Meretz) was elected chairwoman of Meretz, an opposition party that held five seats in the 2018 *Knesset*

facto constitution according to Israel's Supreme Court. The new basic law arose controversy in Israel and drew criticism from the Jewish Diaspora because it does not specifically mention the principle of civic equality. The law's proponents, on the other hand, argue that it constitutes a necessary addition to Israel's incomplete set of basic laws, that its content is similar to the preamble of most European constitutions, and that the principle of civic equality is already enshrined in Israel's legislation and jurisprudence.

Issues in national politics

Terrorism and security threats

The year 2018 was marked by violent clashes between Israel and Gaza, by tension between Israel and Hezbollah, by recurrent sorties of the Israeli air force against Iranian targets in Syria, and by deadly terrorist attacks in the West Bank.

Throughout the year, Palestinians from the Gaza Strip tried (and sometimes managed) to cut through the border between Gaza and Israel. They dispatched hundreds of kites and balloons with incendiary devices, causing major damage in Israel such as the mass burning of fields and crops.

In February, an Israeli was stabbed to death by a Palestinian terrorist near the Ariel settlement in the West Bank. In September, media personality and political activist Ari Fuld was stabbed in the back by a Palestinian terrorist in the Gush Etzion settlement. Fuld's funeral was attended by thousands.

In October, a house in the southern city of Beer-Sheva was hit and destroyed by a rocket fired from the Gaza Strip, and two Israelis were murdered by a Palestinian terrorist in the Barkan industrial zone (West Bank).

In November, Hamas fired dozens of rockets at Israel from the Gaza Strip. Wary of being dragged into war, Netanyahu's government agreed to a ceasefire and to the transfer of money from Qatar to Gaza.

In December, Israel exposed and destroyed tunnels dug by Hezbollah under Israel's border with Lebanon. The purpose of the tunnels was to infiltrate Israel's territory. Had Hezbollah managed to do so, a major war would likely have erupted between Israel and Lebanon, and possibly also with Iran. That same month, a pregnant woman was shot by a Palestinian terrorist near the West Bank settlement of Ofra. The mother survived, but her baby died.

Foreign policy

In April, Prime Minister Netanyahu exposed documents collected by Mossad in Teheran that provided evidence on Iran's nuclear programme.

In May, US President Donald Trump announced America's pull out from the nuclear deal with Iran, and he transferred the US embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. That same month, Netanyahu was the guest of honour of Russian President Vladimir Putin for the national celebration of Russia's victory in the Second World War.

In June, Prince William paid an official visit to Israel – the first of its kind by an heir to the British throne.

In October, Prime Minister Netanyahu paid an official visit to Oman; and Chinese Vice-President Wang Qishan visited Israel.

In November, Israel signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Cyprus, Greece and Italy for the construction of a natural gas pipeline (the world's longest) between Israel's natural gas fields and the European Union. That same month, Israel renewed diplomatic relations with Chad.

Other events

Police investigations involving Prime Minister Netanyahu and some of his associates continued to make headlines throughout the year. In February, the police arrested Shaul Elovitch, a business magnate suspected of having bribed Netanyahu (in the form of favourable media coverage) in return for the latter's approval (in his capacity as communications minister) of a controversial merger between media companies owned by Elovitch.

The government vowed to dismantle the illegal Bedouin settlement of Khan Al Ahmar in the West Bank (following a ruling from the High Court of Justice), but it refrained from doing so under international pressure.

The economy

Israel's economy performed well in 2018. Economic growth averaged 3.3 percent. The public debt-to-gross domestic product (GDP) ratio, which is below the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average, decreased in 2018. Those good results were the combination of low interest rates, expansionary fiscal measures (including corporate tax cuts and higher social spending and investment), a dynamic high-tech sector, and the development of new gas fields. Strong employment gains, low inflation and minimum wage increases boosted consumer spending. Unemployment declined to around 4 percent. This healthy macroeconomic performance has improved Israel's financial stability and sovereign rating.

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