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The New Israeli Government: Cooperation or Conflict?

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The Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR)

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This brief is the first in the PSR series of Critical Policy Briefs for 2020. These briefs address important domestic and foreign policy-oriented issues confronting Palestinian society today.

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After the longest political crisis in the history of Israel, lasting for more than 500 days and marked by three elections in less than a year, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was able to form his government with the approval of the parliament, the Knesset, on May 17th, with 73 votes versus 46 against. This outcome followed his success in reaching an agreement with his rival, Benny Gantz, leader of the Blue and White party, thus securing a stable government for at least three years or longer, per his wishes, during the four-year term of the Knesset.

The new Israeli government is a right-wing one, although it is a unity 'emergency' government that was formed equally between the right-wing parties of Likud, Shas, United Torah Judaism, and Blue and White, considered to be politically centrist and closest to the right, in addition to the Labor Party and Gesher, which have three ministries. Under the slogan of facing the Corona pandemic and its challenges, and with no desire for a fourth election, Netanyahu managed to reach an agreement with Gantz on issues that they had disagreed on, especially in internal politics such as preserving democracy, separating powers and the independence of the judiciary, as well as foreign policy on ways to implement US President Donald Trump's 'Deal of the Century'.

This paper examines the horizon of Palestinian Authority's (PA) relationship with the new Israeli government and whether it will be based on coordination and cooperation, or conflict and confrontation. This will be subject to a range of factors that may influence Israeli policy towards the Palestinians and which may lead to one of these possibilities, such as the stability of the coalition government and the role of the central figures in Blue and White, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defense in influencing Netanyahu's impulses. It will also be affected by the Palestinian position and developments on the ground, the prospects of war with Iran or in Gaza, and the government's relationship with the countries of the region, especially those that have peace agreements with Israel. The European position, and the position of the US Democratic Party that opposes Trump's vision, as well as the position of the Jews abroad, especially in the United States, will also come into play. Finally, what recommendations can be made to the Palestinian leadership to deal with the new situation and its prospects for development in either of the aforementioned directions?

Israeli Government Coalition

Immediately upon the agreement on rotation between Netanyahu and Gantz, doubts arose as to whether Netanyahu would, in the due time, hand the post over to the alternate prime minister, Gantz, who gambled on his political future through an agreement with Netanyahu, whose pattern was to destroy his political opponents with whom he shared power. But Gantz and his group claim that, despite everything, their presence in the government is a national action that will give them an opportunity to influence decisions on all issues of public concern and the interests of the State of Israel, whether purely internal ones or those with regional and international implications, including the relationship with the Palestinians and the issue of Trump plan. The Blue and White Party supports the Trump plan as a package and does not endorse unilateral annexation. The party leaders, Gantz and Gaby Ashkenazi, believe that their presence in the defense and foreign ministries could give them greater ability to influence the position of the government. While receiving the defense portfolio from Naftali Bennett on 18/5/2020 (Hebrew *Channel 13*), Gantz said that he is committed to doing everything in his power to urge political arrangements, strive for peace, and 'push forth President Trump's peace plan with all that it entails'. Ashkenazi stated in a TV interview with Yediot Aharonot on February 3 that annexing settlements without dialogue with the neighbors is an irresponsible act, and that Trump's plan is good as one package. Ashkenazi is known to support a two-state solution with a

desire to keep the Jordan Valley under Israeli control, but within the framework of a peace agreement. On 27/5/2020 (*Arab48* website), Gantz said that, within the next few weeks, research will be conducted professionally through the defense and foreign ministries on the correct ways of work to achieve results that will preserve the security and political interests of Israel, and they will act wisely and responsibly.

There is no doubt that there is disagreement between the Likud and Blue and White on political issues and the two-state solution. This dispute has emerged in the past few days with an exchange of criticism and accusations between officials in both parties. Likud minister Miri Regev attacked Benny Gantz in an interview with *Yediot* newspaper (28/5/2020), accusing him of being a weakling who is not mature enough to assume the position of prime minister, and saying that he will undergo a test during the next year and a half to see if he will learn and mature to reach this position. Israeli radio *Kan* (30/5/2020) quoted officials in Blue and White and Likud as having a dispute on the interpretation of the terms of the partnership agreement between them, especially regarding the annexation of Palestinian areas, where Blue and White claimed that Netanyahu will not be able to annex without the consent of Gantz, while Likud officials said Netanyahu has the authority to do so. Nonetheless, some Israeli commentators believe that the coalition agreement will collapse if Netanyahu takes a unilateral decision.

Some Israeli circles report that there is no American enthusiasm for unilateral Israeli steps. The Israeli affairs correspondent on al-Monitor website, Ben Caspit, quoted a high-ranking official as saying that Netanyahu's friends in the White House had refrained, during the past two weeks, from responding to his repeated calls. The President's Senior Advisor, Jared Kushner, and his wife, Ivanka Trump, are 'not enthusiastic to the idea of annexation, given the current conditions of play'. The website added that Netanyahu's main problem is that he is 'unable to read Washington's real intentions at this stage'. That is why Netanyahu may resort to a symbolic annexation of a settlement or a few settlement blocs that were in discussion for annexation to Israel in the context of land exchange with the Palestinians.

It appears that the government coalition will suffer from instability that may not enable it to withstand three years, and there are doubts about Netanyahu's intentions toward Gantz taking over as prime minister after a year and a half; he may resort to early elections before that. He is trying to use the presence of Blue and White to press his policy. But will Netanyahu oppose the reserved position of the security chiefs on the Trump plan and unilateral annexation, given that the current chief of staff, Aviv Kochavi, and the head of the General Security Service, the Shin Bet, Nadav Argaman, had managed to stop Netanyahu from annexing the Jordan Valley unilaterally on the eve of the elections before last, in September 2019. Netanyahu's retreat came against a backdrop of opposition from senior officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defense and senior officers (*Haaretz*, 27/5/2020). They may succeed, again, in postponing Netanyahu's decisions, thus saving the Palestinians the possibility of a clash, albeit for a while.

The Palestinian position

An opinion poll by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, which was conducted after the US administration announced its 'Deal of the Century', showed a Palestinian consensus (94%) against the deal and all its provisions. The results also indicated that two-thirds of the public (65%) supported the declaration of President Abbas against the deal, that there will be no relations with Israel and the US, including security, and that Israel must assume responsibility as an occupying power. The majority also demanded an end to the internal division, the withdrawal of recognition of Israel, ending the security coordination with it, ceasing the implementation by the Oslo Agreement, and even resorting to armed actions in response to the Deal of the Century. In contrast, a majority of 68% believed that President Abbas will not abide by what he said and will not stop security coordination with Israel.¹

In the face of this, there was no way for the Palestinian leadership, after the Israeli government announced its plans for annexation of Palestinian territory as per the Deal of the Century, except to carry out its oft-repeated threats, especially after it had lost the confidence of the public in its seriousness to do so, and the Israeli leadership had become immune to the Palestinian Authority's threats, seeing them as empty bluffs.

¹ <http://pcpsr.org/en/node/799>

Consequently, the Palestinians showed, for the first time, that they were serious in implementing their threats to suspend agreements with Israel, and stopped civil and security coordination with the Israeli side. The occupation army estimates that escalation in the Palestinian Territory is very probable against the backdrop of the annexation. Kochavi has issued a 'warning to military commanders' regarding a possible escalation in the West Bank.

On the other hand, there is the possibility of an outbreak of clashes with Gaza in response to the events in the West Bank, although it seems that Hamas will attempt to take advantage of the situation to strengthen its authority in Gaza and achieve independence from Ramallah. It appears that Israel will be concerned with thwarting any efforts for Palestinian reconciliation and unity. In the past, the Israeli authorities took the Palestinian Authority into account when dealing with Gaza's economic issues and tax revenues. However, now, in light of cancellation of all agreements, the Israeli government may also feel that it is absolved of the Paris Protocol and will begin to deal with Gaza as an independent entity, including the supply of Gaza's tax revenues to Hamas. This may be one of the biggest temptations for Hamas to move forward with its project of establishing a mini-state in Gaza, although things are not simple in light of the complexities of the situation in Gaza and the presence of various, regional overlaps and interests, some of which may be motivated to provoke confrontation with Israel from time to time.

An estimate of a possible escalation in the West Bank may be used as a means of pressure on the government to postpone hasty, unilateral steps. But the situation in Gaza, and the possibility of Hamas trying to exploit the opportunity to move towards a broader agreement with Israel than the armistice agreements that have, so far, been discussed, may be an incentive for Netanyahu to move towards the implementation of his promises with indifference towards the warnings, given that Gaza is the main problem, while the West Bank, which is already under Israeli security control, may be easier to control and manipulate.

Arab countries

The presence of Blue and White in the government gives greater weight to the relationship with the Arab countries, especially those which have peace agreements with Israel: Egypt and Jordan, as expressed by the leaders of the Party, Gantz and Ashkenazi. The Party's position before the elections was that annexation would be in agreement with the United States and in coordination with the relevant regional and international parties. Both seem to support the generals' position that rejects the idea of unilateral implementation, which, in the words of General (Reserve) Amos Gilad, the former director of the Political-Military Affairs Bureau at Israel's Defense Ministry, 'is a disaster for Israel because it could destroy the relationship with Jordan, thanks to which Israel has secure, eastern borders'. (*Yediot*, 13/5/2020.)

They are actually very concerned with the position of King Abdullah II, which he expressed in an interview with *Der Spiegel* on 15/5/2020: that, should Israel take 'any steps to annex parts of the West Bank next July will lead to a major clash' with Jordan. He warned of the collapse of the Palestinian Authority and that the region, in this case, will witness 'more chaos and extremism'.

Certainly, former generals such as Gantz and Ashkenazi fear that Jordan and Egypt will cancel or freeze their agreements with them. They also fear the possibility of a weakening of the Jordanian rule, which would be a strategic threat to Israeli security. The question, however, is how serious they feel the Arab positions to be. If Israeli security and political estimates indicate that Jordan will move towards the abolition or freezing of its peace agreement with Israel, they will do everything they can to avoid this nightmare-like scenario and will plant their feet firmly on the ground to stop Netanyahu, which could effectively lead to the disintegration of the government. For the Israeli endeavor is towards more normalization with the Arab world, not the loss of what exists officially and publicly. Although, in this context, some Arab countries still profess their relations with Israel, especially the Gulf states and Sudan, which have not cut ties with Israel even after Netanyahu announced his intention to impose Israeli sovereignty on areas in the West Bank.

War with Iran

The strategic estimates issued by The Institute for National Security Studies, presented by director Amos Yadlin to the president of the State of Israel, Reuven Rivlin, on 6/1/2020, and which address the threats,

challenges and scenarios of war that Israel may wage in 2020, indicate that war with Iran or militias loyal to it in Iraq, Syria or Lebanon is a possibility. The most prominent challenge is the Iranian deployment in the region and the dangers of Iran's nuclear project. The danger of the outbreak of war on the northern front is due to Iran's pursuit of deployment there and while supplying Hezbollah with precision-guided rockets. This may force Israel to carry out a preemptive strike. The report states that a delay in a truce agreement with Gaza deepens Iranian influence and enhances the possibility of confrontation on the southern front.

Israel has carried out a series of attacks on Iranian and Hezbollah targets in Syria and Iraq, and Israeli information indicates that Iran has begun to reduce its troops and evacuate military bases in Syria, as well as reducing the size of weapon transfer by air to Syria. According to Israeli military sources, this was due to the Israeli raids that reached the Syrian depth, targeting Iranian presence, infrastructure and leaders and not only thwarting the smuggling of weapons to Hezbollah. Former Defense Minister Naftali Bennett pledged to continue operations until the withdrawal of Iran from Syria.

Currently, it seems that the issue of war with Iran on a large scale has receded, due to the retreat of Iran, which is experiencing a major, economic crisis due to the spread of the Corona virus and because of US sanctions. However, the topic may well return to the government's agenda in the coming period, especially if tension increases between Iran and the United States, or if Iran carries out a large provocation of Israel. Any war between Israel and Iran, directly or by proxy, may hinder or postpone the implementation of some Israeli plans in the West Bank, because it may face the Gaza front as well.

The American position

The American position plays a decisive role in Israeli options towards war or peace and even helps to form governments, and Netanyahu has received many "gifts" from President Donald Trump that have helped him win and secure the votes of the right. There is no doubt that Trump's position will determine whether Israel will annex Palestinian areas or not, and when. The coalition agreement between Gantz and Netanyahu talks about a condition of agreement with the Americans. That is, without the American green light, the Netanyahu-Gantz government will not be able to proceed with annexation.

However, given the disagreement between the Republicans and Democrats over the Trump plan, it is clear that Netanyahu has put all his eggs in the Trump basket and lost the Democrats, who support the two-state solution and a Palestinian-Israeli agreement as an alternative to the Trump plan or unilateral annexation by Israel. Gantz' position differs from Netanyahu in the former's concern not to alienate the Democrats, and also to anticipate the possibility of victory of the Democratic candidate Joe Biden, who opposes the Deal of the Century. This is especially likely after Trump's failure to tackle the Corona crisis and very high unemployment rates in the United States, and the recent confrontations against the background of increasing racism.

Some say that the American administration is now completely occupied with its internal affairs, which may lead it not to support Israeli steps towards annexation. Others say that Trump's need for Evangelical support is increasing in light of the existing problems and that he needs an Israeli step to bolster his votes. In any event, if Gantz and his group feel that Trump's chances are weak, this may increase their opposition to Netanyahu's policy of ignoring the position of the Democratic candidate. This could lead to a split in the government, the disruption of annexation, a vote by the Gantz group against it, or the exit of Blue and White from the government.

There is also special importance for the position of the United States Jews, who generally support the option of a two-state solution and agree, overwhelmingly, with the positions of the Democrats. If Netanyahu has challenged them with his positions, which, from their point of view, threaten the future of the State of Israel as 'Jewish and democratic', it is likely that Blue and White will pay attention. Their influence, however, remains limited and not as large as that of the US administration.

European position

The European Union high Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Joseph Burrell, stated on the official page that the EU does not recognize Israel's sovereignty over the West Bank, in accordance with

the relevant Security Council resolutions, and that the Union will continue to follow the situation closely and take the necessary steps.² This is a general statement that does not include a European warning to Israel, because the foreign policy of the EU countries is taken by consensus. There is, however, a possibility to formulate positions and make decisions individually or, perhaps, within a small group.

No Israeli government can ignore the European position, because Europe is the most important economic partner of Israel which gives it a preferential position, without which it would sustain a massive loss. Israeli attention to Europe's position, however, is related to the seriousness of European pressure and the countries involved. This would be a serious issue if Israel receives clear warnings of definite sanctions if its policy were applied. It may also affect the future stability of the government.

Recommendations

Based on the foregoing, there is still an opportunity to postpone the implementation of the Israeli government's program to apply sovereignty over Palestinian areas and, thus, to delay or prevent a clash with the Palestinians. On the other hand, there is a possibility, not insignificant, that Israel will defy the world and international law and decisions, whether by partial or full annexation. This would be unacceptable to all international parties, except the United States, which would be a partner in the decision. What is to be done?

First, applying pressure to prevent a clash by dissuading Israel from its declared policy, which requires a major, diplomatic effort on the regional and international arenas, as well as on the Israeli one, not just by warning of the gravity of the Israeli policy and its potential result of a collapse of security and stability in the region, but also by providing a detailed, Palestinian vision that includes all aspects of a permanent settlement, including alternative maps for the borders. It is preferable that the Palestinian response comes within an Arab framework, rather than singly, with an alternative political program that can relaunch the political process and frustrate Israel's unilateral steps.

Second, laying down a practical plan to solve the problems arising from the leadership's decision to stop the implementation of the agreements, creating appropriate Palestinian alternatives, and adapting Palestinian institutions to the new situation. For example, for commercial and financial transactions, a major role can be assigned to private sector institutions to deal with the Israeli side and avoid formal coordination with it. Popular protection committees must also be formed in areas under Israeli control that do not have Palestinian security forces. A database of new identities and passports can also be built with the United Nations, which could play a role in protecting the freedom of movement of Palestinian citizens.

Third, achieving national unity by inviting all factions to sign a national pact based on a single goal: confronting the Trump plan and Israeli annexation, without going into previous disputes and agreements, and creating mechanisms for cooperation and confidence-building among all, within the framework of political partnership in decision-making, bearing responsibility and joint struggle through peaceful means. This may require a meeting of the PLO's interim leadership framework.

Fourth, pushing for serious Arab positions against Israeli and American policies, exerting pressure on the American administration, and exposing the Arab countries that violate the consensus and establish normalization relations with Israel, by declaring clear positions issued by the PLO leadership and the use of social media to organize wide, popular campaigns and create Arab public opinion.

Fifth, launching a diplomatic campaign in the world that targets governments, parliaments, and civil society organizations, especially in Europe and the US. Also, turning to human rights organizations and the International Criminal Court to play their roles in protecting the rights of the Palestinian people. This comes in parallel with the arrangement of our internal situation, in a way that pushes the world to respect us and to show solidarity with us. The internal Palestinian situation and Arab solidarity would reinforce the international position supporting our people.

² https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/77856/Israel:%20Statement%20by%20High%20Representative%20Josep%20Borrell

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