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Some remarks on final results, international
reactions and international consequences

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Florin Diaconu¹

On March 17, 2015, general elections took place in Israel. The main political competitors have been Likud, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's political party, and the Zionist Union, whose main leader is Isaac Herzog. *These elections took place in a volatile and clearly dangerous geopolitical and strategic context in the entire Greater Middle East* (see, for example, the more and more obvious Iranian bid for regional hegemony, increased instability in Syria and Yemen, expanding terrorist and political activities of the Islamic State, increased pace of the arms race in the Persian Gulf). *The elections, but above all some public statements delivered by Benjamin Netanyahu in the final stages of the electoral campaign have already generated significant reactions on the international arena.* Some possible / probable political and strategic consequences of the elections and of Netanyahu's statements, both at regional and at global level, are also visible, already being extensively covered by different regional or trans-regional open sources.

1. Main competing political programs

On March 17, the very day when general elections took place in Israel, *Jerusalem Post* offered both main political competitors, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Zionist Union leader Isaac Herzog, the chance to deliver a final campaign message to the citizens going to vote along the next few hours. The two texts try to explain the voters "why they [the two political leaders] are worthy of being the next prime minister of Israel. In their own words, without filters or editing"².

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared that "these are fateful days. Soon we will know if world powers will sign a dangerous agreement with Iran that will enable it to continue on its path to achieving a nuclear bomb. A government under my leadership will not contribute to

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² JPost.com Staff, "Jpost exclusive: Netanyahu and Herzog explain why they deserve your vote", *Jerusalem Post*, March 17, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-Elections/Jpost-exclusive-Netanyahu-and-Herzog-explain-why-they-deserve-your-vote-394180>

this happening. We have done much on this issue, in ways seen and unseen, and I intend on continuing to do all in my power to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear state, capable of putting into action its threat to erase Israel from the map”, and also that “during my tenure as prime minister, I proved that I can stand up to great international pressure, and I refused to make concessions on the most important principles to the state of Israel and its citizens. I knew how to stand steadfast against any initiative of concessions, withdrawal and the dividing of Jerusalem. Because of this insistence, we prevented the establishment of a second *Hamastan*, minutes away from Ben-Gurion Airport, that would hurt and endanger the lives of the state’s citizens”. Netanyahu also recognized that there are serious economic hardships, mainly “two challenges before us that I plan to focus on and handle in a fundamental and in-depth manner: the cost of living and the cost of housing”. He also told the voters that, at international level, he was confronted with “great pressure that was directed against me”, because of “my aggressive and unwavering stance to protect the citizens of Israel” which “has not been undermined for a moment”, and also that “the Left is waging a massive campaign, funded with tens of millions of foreign dollars, to raise the voting rate in the Arab sector and in leftist strongholds. We do not have this money, but we have you. We have the majority of the Jewish people that want the continued rule of the nationalist camp”. In his final remarks he said that “only a vote for the Likud will lead to closing the gap between the Likud and Labor”, and also strongly emphasized, again, the significance of national defense and security issues, saying that all “those who want me to continue to lead Israel to achievements and security are obligated to vote for me and my party – Likud”³.

The main leader of the Zionist Union, Isaac Herzog, said the elections represent a “historical opportunity”, and that “we decided to combine our efforts in an effort to put an end to the cycle of despair, and instead to lead the people of Israel down a different path”, and that the aim of the Zionist Union is “to replace Benjamin Netanyahu’s failing government”. He strongly emphasized the need for a massive “program of social reform”, saying that his governmental team will “lower housing prices and reduce the cost of living, health and education. We will reduce poverty and care for the welfare of each and every Israeli citizen”. Speaking about international relations, Herzog said that “the government will maintain security and fight against our enemies, not our friends. We will strike down terrorist groups with a mighty hand and restore relations and strengthen our strategic ties with the US so that we can put a stop to Iran’s nuclear program”. He also said that “we will promote regional efforts to demilitarize and rebuild Gaza. We will jump-

³ *Ibidem*

start the peace process with the Palestinians, while maintaining Israel's security interests"⁴. An interesting part of Herzog final electoral campaign message is that in which he says he is the "grandson of an Israeli Chief Rabbi and the son of an IDF colonel who served as Israel's sixth president", so that he is person who "grew up in the public sphere". These lines might be regarded, we think, as being a tool directly and deliberately aimed at strengthening, as much as possible, his political legitimacy, in a way more fragile than that of his clearly *more experienced* competitor.

We are also underlining an important fact about national security and national defense perceptions in Israel. "Even though the main opposition – the left-center Zionist Union coalition – has pledged to improve relations with the U.S., its leaders share Netanyahu's reservations about the emerging Iran nuclear deal", *BloombergView* reports. The same open source says that "Labor Party chief Isaac Herzog made his views on any Iran deal crystal-clear last week [one week before the elections] during a debate, when asked how his views differed from Netanyahu's: 'There are no differences about the strategic threat'"⁵. *This similarity of the two vastly different political programs which have been in open competition is, as far as we can understand, very significant for the Israeli national security and national defense concerns.*

2. Domestic political 'balance of power' in the final stages of the electoral campaign

On March 17, *Deutsche Welle* published a quite large text saying that "Punishing housing prices and costs of living are threatening to tear Israel's social fabric, according to some economists". The same text estimated that "for the first time since the Six-Day War in 1967, it's pocketbook and not security issues that are turning out Israeli voters. 'The main issue here is economic well-being. It's anxiety over the cost of living, and the fact that for many, many people, things are very tough', Paul Rivlin, an economist at Tel Aviv University, told DW". In order to support such an opinion, the open source we are quoting here from also said that "according to a January poll by Israel's Channel 10, 53 percent of potential voters ranked costs of living and social issues as the most pressing matters going into the election. Less than a quarter listed national security as their main concern", and that the daily worries of the average Israeli "have largely been fuelled by soaring housing prices, which jumped by 55 percent between 2008 and

⁴ *Ibidem*

⁵ Eli LAKE, Josh ROGIN, "How Obama Can Lose in Israel's Election", *BloombergView*, March 17, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.bloombergview.com/articles/2015-03-17/how-obama-can-lose-in-israel-s-election>

2013, according to a damning report released last month by the state comptroller⁶. *Such economic hardships – most probably connected to high costs of national security – clearly eroded Netanyahu’s positions before the elections.*

In such a situation, not too long before March 17, opinion polls and media increasingly indicated that Netanyahu will not win the elections. On March 16, 2015, Euronews reported that “now, polls show support slipping for Netanyahu’s centre-right Likud party. His stiffest challenge comes from the centre-left Zionist Bloc, which is led by Labour Party chief Isaac Herzog and Livni”. The same open source also said that both Herzog and Livni, the most important leaders of the, “have attacked Netanyahu for failing to tackle key economic and social issues, especially the cost of living”, while Netanyahu “has responded to those attacks by trying to paint Herzog and Livni as soft on foreign policy and security issues”. Israeli sources quoted by *Euronews* estimated at that moment that *economic* concerns are going to dominate the elections: “We felt and we experienced a rise in the price of housing and goods in the last five, six years and that is all people talk about”⁷. *The next day, elections and their results proved the widespread evaluation saying that economic problems are going to be more important than national defense and security issues was not at all accurate.*

Less than 10 days before the general elections in Israel, *Al Jazeera* reports, “opinion polls show Netanyahu’s right-wing Likud running neck-and-neck with rival Isaac Herzog, head of the centre-left Zionist Union, linked to the Labour party”. The same open source also reports that “Netanyahu, seeking a fourth term in office, is seen as having a slight advantage of more parliamentary allies with whom to form a coalition government”, and that “latest polls have both Zionist Union and Likud winning 23 of the Knesset’s seats”⁸.

Later on, no more than “six days before Israel’s election, a new set of polls showed Benjamin Netanyahu heading for defeat. Isaac Herzog, his strongest challenger, was leading the race for seats in parliament: 25 for Mr. Herzog’s leftist Zionist Union”, and only “21 for the

⁶ Peter DAHL, “Israeli elections: It’s the economy, stupid!”, *Deutsche Welle (DW)*, March 17, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.dw.de/israeli-elections-its-the-economy-stupid/a-18321455>

⁷ “As Israeli election nears, economic concerns take precedence over peace”, *Euronews*, March 16, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.euronews.com/2015/03/16/as-israeli-election-nears-economic-concerns-take-precedence-over-peace/>

⁸ “Anti-Netanyahu rally draws huge crowd in Israeli city”, *Al Jazeera*, March 8, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2015/03/anti-netanyahu-rally-draws-huge-crowd-israeli-city-150307222711606.html>

prime minister's right-wing Likud Party", reliable Western open sources report⁹. And there were "opinion surveys that as recently as Friday [March 13] gave the challenger [Herzog's Zionist Union] a four-seat lead", *Reuters* reports¹⁰.

In such a context, open sources say, "in a frenzied last day of campaigning, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday [March 16] ruled out the establishment of a Palestinian state and vowed to keep building east Jerusalem settlements as he appealed to hard-line voters on the eve of Israel's closely contested general election", *Associated Press* reports. The same open source estimated that "while his comments Monday [March 16] appeared to be election rhetoric, they nonetheless put him further at odds with the international community, boding poorly for already strained relations with the U.S. and other key allies if he wins a third consecutive term"¹¹.

3. Final results of general elections in Israel and brief comments on major sources of Likud's victory

On March 19, 2015, a text published by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs reports, "the Central Elections Committee has published the final unofficial results of the elections for the 20th Knesset (the official elections results will be announced on March 25, 2015)". The same official source reports that "with all votes counted, the Likud has won 30 seats and the Zionist Camp 24. The Joint Arab List placed third with 13 seats, followed by Yesh Atid with 11, Kulanu with 10, Bayit Yehudi with 8, Shas with 7, Yisrael Beytenu and United Torah Judaism with 6 each, and Meretz with 5 - the last party to pass the minimum threshold for election", and also that "President Reuven Rivlin will begin meeting with party representatives on Sunday, March 22, to ask the party heads for recommendations as to who they prefer as prime minister. He will assign the task of forming the next government to the Knesset member considered to have the best

⁹ Joshua MITNICK, Nicholas CASEY, "Late Strategy Switch by Netanyahu Swayed Israel Election", *Wall Street Journal (WSJ)*, March 20, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.wsj.com/articles/late-strategy-switch-by-netanyahu-swayed-israel-election-1426895648>

¹⁰ Dan WILLIAMS, "Netanyahu's shock re-election leaves Israel's pollsters red-faced", *Reuters*, March 18, at the Internet address <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/18/israel-election-pollsters-idUSL6N0WK1MQ20150318>

¹¹ The Associated Press, "Netanyahu promises no Palestinian state if he is re-elected", *New York Times*, March 16, 2015, at the Internet address http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2015/03/16/world/middleeast/ap-ml-israel-election.html?_r=0

chance of forming a viable coalition”¹² The same text also reports that “voter turnout was high - 72.36% - with more than 4.25 million of the 5,881,696 eligible voters casting their ballots”¹³.

Later on, the domestic political process quite smoothly moved along a normal and easily predictable path. We know that a few days before the elections, Israeli President Reuven Rivlin said he “will try to facilitate the formation of a national unity government led by the Likud and the Zionist Union after Tuesday’s election but will not force it, sources close to Rivlin said Saturday [March 13] night”. According to Israeli media sources, “Rivlin volunteered to mediate between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Zionist Union leader Isaac Herzog at the President’s Residence to help them form a coalition together. In those conversations, he said that the results predicted by the polls would not indicate a clear victory, making a unity government necessary”¹⁴.

Very probably in direct connection to the presidential elegant (but very clear) request (and, also in a possible attempt aimed at diminishing pressures on the international arena), along the weekend, Netanyahu sent “his trusted former chief of staff Natan Eshel to opposition leader Isaac Herzog, to check whether his Zionist Union faction would join a national unity government, sources close to Herzog said on Saturday [March 21, 2015] night. We also know that “sources confirmed a Channel 10 report that Eshel checked informally on Netanyahu’s behalf and that Herzog responded that there was no chance he would join Netanyahu’s government”, and that “Zionist Union officials denied a report that MK [member of the Knesset] Tzipi Livni was considering breaking off from the faction with other MKs and joining the coalition”¹⁵.

Five days after the elections, Israeli president Reuven Rivlin started consultations with “representatives of the various parties on Sunday [March 22] morning in an effort to form a governing coalition as quickly as possible, saying that ‘the majority expressed its desire in a

¹² “Israel votes”, on the official webpage of the *Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, March 19, 2015, at the Internet address <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2015/Pages/Israel-votes-17-March-2015.aspx>

¹³ “The numbers”, in “Israel votes”, on the official webpage of the *Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, March 19, 2015, at the Internet address <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2015/Pages/Israel-votes-17-March-2015.aspx>

¹⁴ “Rivlin to encourage but not force unity government”, *Jerusalem Post*, March 15, 2015, text available at the Internet address <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-Elections/Rivlin-to-encourage-but-not-force-unity-government-393937>

¹⁵ Gil HOFFMAN, Greer Fay CASHMAN, “Labor confirms Netanyahu sought unity government”, *Jerusalem Post*, March 22, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-Elections/Labor-confirms-Netanyahu-sought-unity-government-394677>

clear manner in these elections”, open sources say. Rivlin also said that “amid the security and social challenges that are before us, and the essential need for a budget - we must act to swear in the new government as soon as possible”, and that “We have just endured a stormy and passionate election campaign - this is the time to unite and heal Israeli society. The government that will be formed will have been chosen by a majority of the citizens of Israel, but it must represent all of the citizens of Israel”. According to the open source we are quoting here from, “it is very likely that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will be tasked with forming the next coalition as his Likud party received the most mandates in last week's election by a large margin”¹⁶.

Also on March 22, Israeli President Reuven Rivlin openly “criticized Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for election day comments in which he tried to get out the vote for his Likud party by warning of droves of Arab citizens being bussed to the polls”. An official communiqué says that “the President’s Residence put out a call for all of the citizens of Israel to come and vote”, and also that “everyone must be careful in their comments, especially those that the entire world hears”, *Jerusalem Post* reports. This episode is connected to the fact that, on the same day, Rivlin met “with representatives of the Joint (Arab) List for consultations on who they would recommend that the president task with forming the next coalition”. We also know that “the Joint List expressed staunch opposition to the possibility that Netanyahu would be tasked with forming the next coalition”¹⁷.

When we try to analyze the sources of the broadly unexpected Likud’s victory in the recent general elections in Israel, it might be useful to take into account that many serious and credible commentators indicate long-term and quite intense collective fear and security concerns (both at individual and national level) as being some of the most important factors generating – and also explaining – the clearly unexpected Likud’s victory.

Two days after the elections, for example, Amy Wilentz (she served as the Jerusalem correspondent for *The New Yorker* and is the author of *Martyrs’ Crossing: A Novel*, set in Israel and the West Bank, and of several non-fiction books, including *Farewell, Fred Voodoo: A Letter*

¹⁶ JPost.com Staff, “Rivlin begins consultations with parties: The majority has clearly expressed its desire”, *The Jerusalem Post*, March 22, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-Elections/Rivlin-begins-consultations-with-parties-The-majority-has-clearly-expressed-its-desire-394688>

¹⁷ JPost.com Staff, “Rivlin criticizes Netanyahu's election day comments about Arab voters”, *Jerusalem Post*, March 22, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-Elections/Rivlin-criticizes-Netanyahus-election-day-comments-about-Arab-voters-394709>

from Haiti), wrote: “A Bibi¹⁸ voter is, perhaps, a liberal whose city has been bus-bombed. Or maybe, better yet, a liberal who is watching Islamic State videos”, and that “in the end, I think, many Israeli voters this week just lost courage. Though so many are tired of Netanyahu’s racially tinged, repetitive, reactionary fear-mongering, no one wanted to vote for Bougie¹⁹ and then lose a child in the first bus-bombing after the peace process starts up again”. She is also stating that “as Israel moved to normalize relations with the Palestinians, extremists on both sides of the green line started fomenting campaigns of violence for which average citizens on both sides paid in blood.”²⁰ According to her, too much violence in the region, plus a public mindset dominated by large amounts of violence-related fear are clearly very important factors to be taken into account when trying to understand the final results in the recent general elections in Israel.

An almost general (or at least a really widespread) feeling that *insecurity is the basic feature of entire region* (which means not only in Israel) led to the final results in the elections, some other commentators also say: “it is necessary to understand the changes that have swept over this country since the second intifada in 2000, changes brought about by terrorism and rockets and an unstable region that has made everyone feel insecure. And that insecurity trumps all. To understand Israel is to understand that real, genuine sense of insecurity”²¹.

According to a reliable European open source, “the election result shows that Israeli voters, while preoccupied by daily socioeconomic problems, still place a high priority on security when they cast their ballots”²².

According to some commentators, *the so-called “second Israel” clearly played a capital role in winning the elections*, open sources say. According to such analysts, “Ashkenazi immigrants from Eastern Europe were seen as having an unfair advantage over their Sephardi

¹⁸ *Bibi* is Benjamin Netanyahu’s nickname. See also the following footnote

¹⁹ *Bougie* is Isaac Herzog’s nickname, sometimes used even by very serious and reliable open sources – see, for example, “Bibi beats Bougie”, *The Economist*, March 17, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21646645-late-surge-israels-prime-minister-brings-him-neck-and-neck-his-challenger-dead-heat>

²⁰ Amy WILENTZ, *Reuters*, March 19, 2015, “Why Bibi won: Israel unwilling to pay the price of hope”, at the Internet address <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2015/03/18/why-bibi-won-israel-unwilling-to-pay-the-price-of-hope/>

²¹ Herb KEINON, “Analysis: The country nods to Netanyahu, who now needs to nod to Obama”, *Jerusalem Post*, March 18, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-Elections/Analysis-The-country-nods-to-Netanyahu-who-now-needs-to-nod-to-Obama-394291>

²² Yossi LEMPKOWICZ, “EU cannot use Netanyahu victory to isolate Israel”, *The Parliament Magazine*, March 20, 2015, at the Internet address <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/blog/eu-cannot-use-netanyahu-victory-isolate-israel>

counterparts from North Africa and the Middle East. The people, who are called ‘the second Israel’, have complained since then [the early days of the Israeli state] that the ‘elites’ in the Left, the media and academia have discriminated against them”. The same commentators say that “the ‘second Israel’ did not like the way the media seemed to be deposing Netanyahu and bringing to power the Left under the leadership of Zionist Union leaders Isaac Herzog and Tzipi Livni”, as long as the “the two [Zionist Union leaders] were raised not far from each other in northern Tel Aviv, and both are the children of former Knesset members”. According to such opinions, “many who considered staying home, or voting for one of the Likud’s satellite parties, hurried to the polling stations to cast ballots for the Likud”, and “people who had not voted in years – or at least not for the Likud – felt the need to save Israel from the Left, Iran and a hostile international community”²³.

Some opinions say that a certain role in shaping the voting patterns in Israel was played by the behavior of the USA on the international arena (or, better said, by the way in which decisions and actions of the current team at the White House are perceived by many Israeli voters), and/or by the way in which Palestinian leaders acted, in some crucial moments, along the past decades.

For example, Russell Berman, professor at Stanford (the Walter A. Haas Professor in the Humanities and a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution and the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies) says that “beyond this partisan political arithmetic, it is clear that security concerns were the key to the election and Netanyahu articulated them more effectively than his competition”; and when we are speaking about “Israel’s stance against Iran’s nuclear program, Berman said that the real issue is not Israel’s stance but America’s strategy in the Middle East”, a Stanford-based open source reports. Berman said that “the consistent U.S. policy of reducing its footprint throughout the region has caused regional actors to begin to behave differently with greater attention to their own security. The real question is whether giving up on Pax Americana will also mean giving up on Pax”²⁴, which means the very idea – and reality – of regional peace, stability and predictability in the Greater Middle East.

²³ Gil HOFFMAN, “Likud's win: The 'second Israel' has spoken”, *Jerusalem Post*, March 18, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-Elections/Likuds-win-The-second-Israel-has-spoken-394300>

²⁴ Clifton C. PARKER, “Israeli election results reflect deep divisions in that society, say Stanford scholars”, on the *Stanford News* webpage, March 20, 2015, at the Internet address <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2015/march/israel-election-comments-032015.html>

Speaking about the U.S. actions and the way in which they are perceived, an influential Israeli open source estimates that “as Tehran proves its worth in the fight against ISIS, Israel’s nuclear concerns are taking a back seat in Washington”²⁵. *The formula used by the text quoted above seems to indicate that we might speak, up to a certain point, about a large-scale collective geo-strategic frustration which generated, simply by means of voting, significant domestic consequences in Israel, but also some important potential consequences on the international arena.*

Some opinions indicate that *both* the current U.S. leadership (better said, the Obama administration) and the Palestinian leadership, each of the two actors with *its own* role or contribution, *might* have influenced *a lot* the public mood – and voting patterns – in Israel. First of all, the text we are quoting from describes some episodes regarded as being major mistakes made by the Palestinian Authority. The text says that “at least twice over the last 15 years, Israel has offered the Palestinians extraordinarily generous two-state solutions”. According to the same open source, “the first time was in 2000- 2001, when Ehud Barak and Bill Clinton offered the Palestinians more than 90 percent of the West Bank and all of Gaza, with a capital in Jerusalem. Yasser Arafat turned down the offer and started an intifada in which some 4,000 people were killed”. And “then again in 2007, Ehud Olmert offered the Palestinians an even more generous resolution, to which Mahmoud Abbas failed to respond positively”, and “this [Palestinian] failure also contributed to the weakening of the Israeli Center-Left and the strengthening of the Right”. The second source of the unexpected victory of Netanyahu’s Likud was, according to the same commentators, the fact that “the Obama administration also contributed to the election results in Israel by refusing to listen to Israeli concerns – concerns shared by Israelis of every political stripe – about the impending deal with Iran. Many Israelis have given up any hope of influencing the Obama administration to demand more from the Iranians”, and “the current deal contains a sunset provision which all but guarantees that Iran will have nuclear weapons within a decade”. The *main* conclusion of the comment we are quoting here from is that “If Israelis voted their fears, these were not entirely irrational fears – they were based on the history of the region”, and that “Netanyahu’s rhetoric found a receptive home audience, because many Israeli voters have long memories. They remember what the leaders of the Palestinian Authority, the Obama administration, the Iranian mullahs, and the United Nations have done and said with regard to

²⁵ Zvi BAR’EL, “Unlikely bedfellows, U.S. and Iran are cozying up”, *Haaretz*, March 20, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.haaretz.com/news/middle-east/.premium-1.647961>

Israel. They remember the lethal responses to earlier peace offers”²⁶. *For some readers, the lines above might be exceedingly emotional, but we are to remember that, in the end, voters (anytime, anywhere) do have emotions too, and are not at all robot-like strictly rational machineries.*

4. Some significant reactions and possible consequences on the international arena

It is not possible, in most situations, to clearly and completely separate reactions generated by the very results of recent general elections in Israel from the reactions generated by *some* of the Netanyahu’s statements in the final stages of the electoral campaign. This difficulty is not at all easy to overcome, as long Netanyahu (together with *both* his political-strategic agenda and his statements – sometimes acceptable and accepted, sometimes less acceptable, according to the standards of several important actors on the international arena) clearly won the elections.

a. The United States of America: already important tensions are now growing larger

Along several decades, the U.S. has been Israel’s most important strategic partner, and Israel has been Washington’s strongest, most important and most reliable ally in the entire Middle East. Recently, this long-term mutually beneficial relationship significantly deteriorated. There were visible and significant tensions in the U.S.-Israel bilateral relations even before the recent elections in Israel.

In early March, almost two weeks before the general elections in Israel, Netanyahu told the U.S. Congress, speaking about Iran and ISIS: “So when it comes to Iran and ISIS, the enemy of your enemy is your enemy”. He also said that “To defeat ISIS and let Iran get nuclear weapons would be to win the battle and to lose the war. We can’t let that happen...”. *Euronews* reported that the Israeli leader was warning “the US that it’s negotiating a bad deal with Iran that will pave the way to a ‘nuclear nightmare’”, and the same source also says that Obama “said the speech had offered nothing new”, and that the U.S. President declared that “on the core issue, which is how to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon which would make it far more dangerous, the

²⁶ Alan DERSHOWITZ, “The role of the Palestinian Authority in Israel’s election results”, Jerusalem Post, March 18, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/The-role-of-the-Palestinian-Authority-in-Israelis-election-results-394370>

prime minister (Benjamin Netanyahu) did not offer any viable alternatives”²⁷. *Major differences of perception in the Iranian nuclear dossier were, along the past few years, still are – and, most probably, will be in the future as well – a major source of tensions between President Barack Obama and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. But it would be an oversimplifying solution to think that only the Iranian problem generates tensions harming the U.S-Israel relation. Some Western open sources are counting no less than “15 reasons why Netanyahu despises Obama”*²⁸. Even if some of them are to be legitimately regarded as exaggerated and highly unrealistic, *some of them are clearly serious and might be legitimately taken into account in any serious analysis.*

Before the elections, on March 16, the U.S. was clearly avoiding to fall into the trap of commenting the domestic political evolutions in Israel. On that day, less than 24 hours before the elections, on March 16, 2015, “U.S. State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki would only say... that the U.S. will work with whoever wins the Israeli election”, *Associated Press* reports²⁹.

Speaking about one of the *recent* very serious sources of tensions in the U.S.-Israel relations, *Reuters* reports that “while campaigning, Netanyahu further upset the White House by disavowing a commitment to a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which has long been a cornerstone of U.S.-led peace efforts”. The same source also says that “Netanyahu has since tried to row back on the rhetoric, saying on U.S. television that he supported a two-state solution when the conditions were right”³⁰. The same tension-generating episode is dealt with by a reliable open source on March 18, in the afternoon (less than 20 hours after the end of elections in Israel), when a senior *BBC* commentator said that “Mr. Netanyahu made a series of promises that would worsen Israel’s relations with the United States and Europe if he stays on as prime minister”. The *BBC* commentator said when Netanyahu “promised thousands of new homes for settlers in the occupied territories. And he said that he would not allow the Palestinians to have a

²⁷ “Israeli PM warns US against Iran nuclear deal and paving way to a nuclear nightmare”, *Euronews*, March 4, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.euronews.com/2015/03/04/israeli-pm-warns-us-against-iran-nuclear-deal-and-paving-way-to-a-nuclear-/>

²⁸ Jim MEYERS, “15 Reasons Netanyahu Really Hates Obama”, on the *Newsmax* webpage, March 19, 2015, text accessed at the Internet address http://www.newsmax.com/newswidget/reasons-netanyahu-hates-obama/2015/03/19/id/631214/?Dkt_nbr=EE9E-1&nmx_source=J...

²⁹ Josef FEDERMAN, Associated Press, “Netanyahu promises no Palestinian state if he is re-elected”, *News 5 WKRG.com*, at the Internet address <http://www.wkrg.com/story/28526274/netanyahu-promises-no-palestinian-state-if-he-is-re-elected>; the same text was published in *New York Times*, March 16, 2015, at the Internet address http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2015/03/16/world/middleeast/ap-m1-israel-election.html?_r=0

³⁰ Luke BAKER, Patricia ZENGERLE, “U.S. House Speaker Boehner to visit Israel”, *Reuters*, March 20, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/20/us-israel-usa-boehner-idUSKBN0MG10020150320>

state”, he directly and massively collided with both the U.S. and the E.U., mainly because “peace through the so-called ‘two-state’ solution is official policy for the US and the European Union. The BBC specialist also estimated that “relations with the White House during a fourth Netanyahu term as prime minister are likely to be even more glacial than they are already”³¹.

Immediately after the moment when Prime Minister Netanyahu made the already notorious statements (presented above) about the way in which he is going to reject the two-state solution, U.S. reactions started to be harsher and harsher. In this context, it might be useful to take into account at least two potentially important facts. First of all, almost 10 days before the elections, *Al Jazeera* reports, “Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has denied reports that he had backed away from support for a two-state solution that he expressed in a 2009 speech”, openly denying, this way, some remarks in a “statement from Netanyahu's right-wing Likud party”, made public on March 8³². Secondly, we might also take into account that some very serious commentators say that Netanyahu’s statements at the end of the campaign were not the best possible solution to be imagined. On the contrary, it might have been a significant *tactical mistake*. We know this because several Stanford University specialists and scholars recently offered some interesting evaluations of the results of the elections in Israel. The open source we are quoting here from reports that “Stephen Krasner, Stanford’s Graham H. Stuart Professor of International Relations and a senior fellow at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, said that Netanyahu’s apparent rejection of a two-state solution for now is a tactical mistake”. Krasner estimates that “even if a two-state agreement is not likely, there is nothing else on offer for now, and Israel loses nothing by keeping it on the table but risks alienating international support if it takes it off the table”. Krasner also estimates that, when we” are speaking about the Iranian nuclear program and the strategic threats it is generating, In regard to the Iranian nuclear issue, Krasner described it as a threat to the stability of the Middle East and the world: the only durable solution is regime change in Iran but this can only come from within Iran. It may or may not happen”³³.

International press agencies report that, immediately after the moment when first results of general elections in Israel were announced, indicating a clear – and unexpected – victory of

³¹ Jeremy BOWEN, BBC Middle East editor, “Israel election: Dramatic turnaround for Netanyahu”, *BBC*, March 18, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-31936226>

³² “Netanyahu denies backing away from two-state solution”, *Al Jazeera*, March 9, 2015, text available at the Internet address <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2015/03/netanyahu-state-solution-150308213734653.html>

³³ Clifton C. PARKER, *op. cit.*

Netanyahu's Likud, very senior U.S. officials simply declined to make any comments. For example, "U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry declined to comment on the Israel election when asked by reporters on the sidelines of nuclear talks with Iran in Lausanne, Switzerland"³⁴.

Almost one full day *after* the elections, "U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry called Benjamin Netanyahu... to congratulate the Israeli prime minister on his Likud party's apparent re-election victory". *USA Today* reports that "the phone call is the first formal outreach from the Obama administration to an Israeli leader that Obama has often butted heads with over Iran nuclear negotiations and the Palestinian peace process". The same open source lists several *serious* concerns of the White House, directly connected to the recent statements belonging to the Israeli Prime Minister (and already listed above), but also quotes White House political director David Simas, who told *CNN* that "we're not going to weigh in one way or another except to say that the United States and Israel have a historic and close relationship and that will continue going forward"³⁵.

Next day, on March 19, Netanyahu made clearly 'softer' statements about the way in which the Palestinian problem is to be solved. Open sources report that, after the elections, "Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spoke to Fox News' Megyn Kelly on Thursday [March 19], two days after the elections and reiterates that he did not retract his statement about a two-state solution during a speech at Bar-Ilan University six years ago". The same open sources say Netanyahu declared: "I didn't retract any of the things I said in my speech six years ago, calling for a solution in which a demilitarized Palestinian state recognizes a Jewish state"³⁶. *In an attempt to significantly defuse tensions in bilateral relations with the Obama administration – or at least to underline that conflicting opinions and agendas can coexist, without major difficulties, with a strong and really mutually useful strategic partnership – Prime Minister Netanyahu declared, also on March 19, 2015, after he had been severely criticized by the White House, that "there are so many areas where we must work together with the United States".* In the same interview with

³⁴ "Iran says no difference between Israeli parties, all aggressors: Mehr", *Reuters*, March 18, 2015, text available at the Internet address <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/18/us-israel-election-iran-idUSKBN0ME16C20150318>

³⁵ David JACKSON, Gregory KORTE, "Secretary of State Kerry calls to congratulate Netanyahu", *USA TODAY*, March 18, 2015, text available at the Internet address <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2015/03/18/obama-benjamin-netanyahu-israel-iran/24950175/>

³⁶ "Netanyahu on Fox: I didn't retract statement on two-state solution", *Jerusalem Post*, March 20, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.jpost.com/Breaking-News/Netanyahu-on-Fox-I-didnt-retract-statement-on-two-state-solution-394554>

NBC, Netanyahu also said: “America has no greater ally than Israel and Israel has no greater ally than the United States”³⁷. Even open sources in the Arab world recognized that March 19 marked a change in Netanyahu’s remarks on the two-state solution. On March 19, Netanyahu appeared “to have softened his tone from hard-line statements made during his re-election campaign about the establishment of a Palestinian state”, *Al Jazeera* was reporting. In an interview with *MSNBC*, *Al Jazeera* also stated, the Israeli Prime Minister said: “I don’t want a one-state solution, I want a sustainable, peaceful two-state solution, but for that circumstances have to change”. But he also said that, at this very moment, “every territory that is vacated in the Middle East is taken up by Islamist forces” and that ““if you want to get peace, you’ve got to get the Palestinian leadership to abandon their pact with Hamas and engage in genuine negotiations with Israel for an achievable peace”³⁸.

Some reliable Western open sources are reporting that major differences – and even political-diplomatic tensions – are now present, more visible than in other previous occasions, in U.S.-Israel bilateral relations. On March 19, for example, Reuters published a quite long report, saying that “President Barack Obama told Benjamin Netanyahu on Thursday that Washington would ‘reassess’ its options on U.S.-Israel relations and Middle East diplomacy after the Israeli prime minister took a position against Palestinian statehood during his re-election campaign, a White House official said”. In practical terms, “The White House, unmoved by Netanyahu’s effort to backtrack, delivered a fresh rebuke against him on Thursday [March 19] and signaled that Washington may reconsider its decades-old policy of shielding close ally Israel from international pressure at the United Nations”. A senior political source in the White House, quoted by Reuters, declared that “The president told the [Israeli] prime minister that we will need to reassess our options following the prime minister’s new positions and comments regarding the two-state solution”. Earlier, White House spokesman Josh Earnest, warned that there would be “consequences” for Israel, because Netanyahu “walked back from commitments that Israel had previously made to a two-state solution” Earnest also told reporters that Netanyahu’s changed ideas and / or statements on Palestinian state constitute a serious “cause for the United States to evaluate what our path is forward” . After been publicly criticized by the White House, Netanyahu declared that “I don’t want a one-state solution. I want a sustainable, peaceful two-

³⁷ For the text fragments quoted here see, “Netanyahu says Israel has 'no greater ally' than U.S. - NBC”, *Reuters*, March 19, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/19/israel-election-netanyahu-idUSL2N0WL0RO20150319>

³⁸ “Netanyahu 'still committed' to Palestinian statehood”, *Al Jazeera*, March 19, 2015, text available at the Internet address <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/03/netanyahu-committed-palestinian-statehood-150319213444662.html>

state solution. But for that, circumstances have to change”. The final remark in the report published by *Reuters* evaluates U.S-Israeli relations as being “frosty”. And they “worsened” even more, the same open source says, when Netanyahu “accepted a Republican invitation to speak to Congress two weeks before the Israeli election, a move assailed by Democratic leaders as an insult to the presidency and a breach of protocol”³⁹.

Only *two days after* the general elections in Israel, the U.S. President Barack Obama “phoned Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Thursday [March 19] night to congratulate him on his win in the elections”, open sources report. The same open sources report, heavily quoting a statement made public by the White House, that the U.S. President “emphasized the importance the United States places on... close military, intelligence, and security cooperation with Israel, which reflects the deep and abiding partnership between both countries”. The bilateral relation is still to be regarded as a strong partnership. The clear proof of such an interpretation of the White House statement is that it says the two leaders “agreed to continue consultations on a range of regional issues”. *Anyhow, the path of the U.S.-Israel relations is made clearly more complex because of some problems which are evaluated in clearly different – and openly colliding – ways by Obama and Netanyahu. These are at least two, if we are speaking about the really major issues: the future of the Palestinians, and the Iranian problem.* Dealing with the Palestinian issue, President Obama “reaffirmed the United States’ long-standing commitment to a two-state solution that results in a secure Israel alongside a sovereign and viable Palestine”. And, speaking about the Iranian nuclear program, Obama also “reiterated that the United States is focused on reaching a comprehensive deal with Iran that prevents Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon and verifiably assures the international community of the exclusively peaceful nature of its nuclear program”⁴⁰.

Open sources indicate that the crisis of the U.S.-Israel (or at least of the Obama-Netanyahu) relations still goes on. Even if Netanyahu “sought on Thursday [March 19, 2015] to backtrack” from the statements before the elections (those dealing with rejecting the two-state solution), the White House went on scolding Netanyahu. In an interview “conducted on Friday [March 20] and published on Saturday [March 21]”, President Obama said: “I did indicate to him

³⁹ For the text fragments quoted along this paragraph see Matt SPETALNICK, “Obama tells Netanyahu U.S. to ‘reassess’ policy on Israel, Mideast diplomacy”, *Reuters*, March 19, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/19/us-israel-election-netanyahu-idUSKBN0MF2JV20150319>

⁴⁰ JPost.com Staff, “Obama phones Netanyahu to congratulate him”, *Jerusalem Post*, March 20, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.jpost.com/Breaking-News/Obama-phones-Netanyahu-to-congratulate-him-394543>

that we continue to believe that a two-state solution is the only way for the long-term security of Israel, if it wants to stay both a Jewish state and democratic," Obama said, in his first public comments on the issue" and "And I indicated to him that given his statements prior to the election, it is going to be hard to find a path where people are seriously believing that negotiations are possible". The open source we are quoting here from also reports that, in spite of obvious and major tensions in bilateral relations, "Obama underscored his support for Israel's security, saying he would make sure that military and intelligence cooperation continues in order to keep the Israeli people safe"⁴¹.

In the U.S., while the White House (and, in a broader sense, the Democrats) offered very clear signs proving that they strongly reject some of the ideas which constitute a very significant part of Netanyahu's political and security agenda, important Republican leaders are strongly and openly supporting (both before and after the elections) the Israeli Prime Minister. For example, "Republican John Boehner, the speaker of the US Congress and an ardent backer of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, will visit Israel at the end of this month, diplomatic sources said on Friday [March 20, 2015]", Jerusalem Post reports, one day after the harsh critics coming from the White House. The same open source, extensively quoted by Israeli media, also reports that "the visit will follow Netanyahu's surprise election victory this week and his speech to Congress earlier this month on Boehner's invitation, an event that aggravated the White House and drew sharp criticism"⁴². Reuters reports that "diplomats in Israel said Boehner's delegation was expected to include only fellow Republicans, and said it would take place before the end of March"⁴³. According to BBC, Kevin Smith, a spokesman for Mr. Boehner, said that "he [Boehner] looks forward to visiting the country, discussing our shared priorities for peace and security in the region, and further strengthening the bond between the United States and Israel"; BBC also reports, quoting Israeli open sources, that Boehner's visit "visit would include several congressional Republicans"⁴⁴.

⁴¹ Will DUNHAM, "Obama says it is now 'hard to find a path' on Israeli-Palestinian peace", *Reuters*, March 22, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/22/us-usa-israel-obama-idUSKBN0MHORP20150322>

⁴² Reuters, "US Congress speaker Boehner to visit Israel this month", *Jerusalem Post*, March 20, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.jpost.com/Breaking-News/US-Congress-speaker-Boehner-to-visit-Israel-this-month-394568>

⁴³ Luke BAKER, Patricia ZENGERLE, "U.S. House Speaker Boehner to visit Israel", *Reuters*, March 20, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/20/us-israel-usa-boehner-idUSKBN0MG10020150320>

⁴⁴ "US House Speaker John Boehner to visit Netanyahu", *BBC*, March 20, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.bbc.com/news/31987612>

Open sources also report that “Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu received “a congratulatory phone call on Saturday [March 21] from one of the Senate’s leading hawks, Lindsey Graham, who reassured the newly reelected prime minister that Congress will review any nuclear deal that President Barack Obama strikes with Iran”. The same sources offer some extra details, saying that “the South Carolina Republican [Graham], who is preparing for a potential presidential run in 2016 focused tightly on foreign policy, told Netanyahu that there remains bipartisan support in Washington for Graham’s bill that would allow congressional review of a deal intended to scale back Iran’s nuclear ambitions”⁴⁵.

b. The European Union and some great European powers

A reliable European open source is quoting Federica Mogherini, the EU’s foreign affairs chief, who “in her statement following the election... congratulated Netanyahu on his victory while at the same time reiterating the EU’s commitment ‘to working with the incoming Israeli government on a mutually beneficial relationship as well as on the relaunch of the peace process’. The same open source reports that Mogherini also added: “We are at a crucial moment, with many threats all over the Middle East. The EU staunchly supports a peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in the interest of the Israeli people, of the Palestinian people and of the whole region. We are at your side, you can count on us”; and it also reports that “some in EU circles believed Herzog, a former chair of the Knesset delegation for relations with Israel, would have been ‘softer’ on the issue of settlements and Palestinian statehood, an issue Brussels has considered a key stumbling block in EU-Israeli relations in recent years”⁴⁶. It might be useful to remember that in early January, the same Federica Mogherini *clearly* stated that “the European Union will promote and support now more than ever efforts to achieve a lasting peace based on a two-state solution”⁴⁷.

In *Germany*, some of the members of the Parliament also expressed their worries “over Netanyahu’s rejection of a Palestinian state in remarks made before Tuesday’s vote”. Several

⁴⁵ Burgess EVERETT, “Graham congratulates Netanyahu, assures on congressional review of Iran deal”, March 21, 2015, on the *Politico* webpage, text available at the Internet address <http://www.politico.com/story/2015/03/graham-netanyahu-congressional-review-iran-deal-116282.html>

⁴⁶ Yossi LEMPKOWICZ, “EU cannot use Netanyahu victory to isolate Israel”, *The Parliament Magazine*, March 20, 2015, at the Internet address <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/blog/eu-cannot-use-netanyahu-victory-isolate-israel>

⁴⁷ “STATEMENT. Statement by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini on the situation in Israel and Palestine”, on the *European Union EXTERNAL ACTION* webpage, January 6, 2015, at the Internet address http://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/2015/141206_02_en.htm

members of Germany-Israel group in the Bundestag “praised on Wednesday [March 18, a day after the elections] the Israeli election but expressed concern about the prime minister’s rejection of a Palestinian state”. The open source we are quoting here from also reports that some members of the German Parliament wrote a letter by means of which they “would like to congratulate all elected deputies to the 20th Knesset’, adding the Israeli voters made it particularly exciting and left no doubt about the country’s democracy” and that “the deputies said they hoped the Israel-Palestinian peace process would continue, and noted ‘with great concern the rejection of a Palestinian state by Prime Minister Netanyahu’, in remarks shortly before the vote”⁴⁸.

Israeli open sources say, quoting *AFP*, that “on Friday [March 20], President Francois Hollande congratulated Netanyahu on his victory after the French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius called on Israel on Wednesday [March 18] to revive ‘negotiations for an agreement on a comprehensive and a final peace’ with the Palestinians based on a two-state solution. Fabius declared, *AFP* reports, that “only the creation of a viable and sovereign Palestinian state living in peace and security alongside Israel, will ensure peace and prosperity in the Middle East”⁴⁹.

As early as March 17, a very senior U.K. official – British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond – said that only by means of very serious efforts, “Britain and Germany had been holding back the European Union from taking a tougher stance with Israel and expressed concern for the prospects of a two-state solution”. Hammond also said “Many of my European colleagues are becoming incredibly frustrated by the process... They want to support Israel but they need something back in return. They need some clear sense that Israel is at least willing to try to find a two-state solution”. The senior British official also said: “we’re also exasperated by the moves the Palestinians have made... We told them not to do it [apply to join the International Criminal Court], we told them it would be not in their best interests, we told them it would have negative consequences they can’t control. They did it anyway. We’re often exasperated by things done on both sides”. All these comments were delivered after the moment when Netanyahu publicly declared, a day before the elections, that he “would not agree to recognize a Palestinian state

⁴⁸ Benjamin WEINTHAL, “German MPs upset by PM’s stand on Palestinian statehood”, *Jerusalem Post*, March 19, 2015, at <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-Elections/German-MPs-upset-by-PMs-stand-on-Palestinian-statehood-394402>

⁴⁹ JPost.com Staff, “UN’s Ban to Netanyahu: Commit to two-state solution with the Palestinians”, *Jerusalem Post*, March 21, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/UNs-Ban-to-Netanyahu-Commit-to-two-state-solution-with-the-Palestinians-394620>

during a future term in office”, but also “before the publication of results from the election that saw a resounding victory for Netanyahu and his Likud party”⁵⁰.

Also in the *United Kingdom*, “while official reaction to Benjamin’s Netanyahu’s election victory has been muted, with Foreign Office sources clearly wishing to downplay fears for the two-state solution in particular and the peace process in general, some MPs registered their concerns at the prospect of another right wing Israeli government”, open sources report. The source we are quoting here from also reports that “Shortly after the results became known, British Premier David Cameron tweeted his congratulations to Netanyahu, adding ‘As one of Israel’s firmest friends, the UK looks forward to working with the new government’”, and that “later Cameron’s spokesman said that Britain’s approach was to emphasize it wanted to see a two-state solution and to do ‘all we can to support that’”. The same source says that “during Commons Questions on Wednesday [March 19, one day after the elections in Israel], International Development Minister Desmond Swayne told several pro-Palestinian MPs who registered strong concern at Israelis endorsement of Netanyahu’s policies on settlements, ‘occupation’ and toward Gaza that they should not be ‘too hasty’. Swayne also said that “it will be some time before the true policies of the new government emerge, after long negotiations over a coalition. In the meantime, we remain committed to the two-state solution and we make our representations known on all the issues that have been raised, at the highest level”⁵¹.

c. Political actors of different sorts in the Middle East

The most irritated reactions in the region were, predictably, those of Iran and of the Palestinians. Some other reactions are significantly more restrained (see the Arab League), and some are even balanced, mixing a degree of acceptance with some critics (see Egypt and technocrats working for the GCC), and a few are openly regarding Netanyahu’s victory as a positive event (opposition groups in Syria).

One day after the elections in Israel, *Iranian* officials delivered a very clear reaction. *Reuters* reports that “Iran’s foreign ministry said on Wednesday [March 18, 2015] it saw no

⁵⁰ Stuart WINER, “‘UK, Germany have held EU back from tougher stance with Israel’”, *The Times of Israel*, March 19, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.timesofisrael.com/uk-germany-hold-back-eu-from-tougher-stance-with-israel/>

⁵¹ Jerry LEWIS, “Cameron congratulates PM, but some MPs question future of peace process”, *Jerusalem Post*, March 19, 2015, at <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-Elections/Cameron-congratulates-PM-but-some-MPs-question-future-of-peace-process-394409>

difference between Israel's political parties and called them all aggressors, semi-official Mehr News Agency reported after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's election victory"⁵².

On March 17, 2017, the day when general elections took place in Israel, *Wafa* reported that "Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's vow to consolidate settlement construction in East Jerusalem and prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state if re-elected hit the front page headlines of the three Palestinian Arabic dailies". *Wafa* also reported that the newspaper *Al-Quds* "added in this regard that Netanyahu promised voters 'to continue to occupy Arab (East) Jerusalem', noting that he has 'laid out three No's to salvage his declining popularity'"⁵³.

One day after the general elections in Israel, the same *Wafa* reported that all three major Palestinian newspapers "quoted PLO Executive Committee member Saeb Erekat, who stressed that the Palestinians are likely to intensify their diplomatic campaign against Israel in the international arena, in light of the results of the Israeli elections which saw Netanyahu's far-right party winning the first place in the Knesset". *Wafa* also reported that the newspaper *Al-Ayyam* "quoted Hamas spokesperson, Sami Abu Zuhri, who said that Hamas does not differentiate between any of the Israeli candidates"⁵⁴, who, according to Hamas, have the same approach towards the Palestinian people and their inalienable rights"⁵⁵.

Also on March 18, less than 12 hours after the end of the general elections in Israel, "Palestinian leaders... called for international pressure on Israel and support for their unilateral moves towards statehood after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's election win". Reliable Western open sources estimate that "Netanyahu's surprise victory, after pledging in the final days of the campaign that there would be no Palestinian state as long as he was in power, left Palestinians grim about prospects for a negotiated solution to a decades-old conflict". In such a context, Saeb Erekat, chief Palestinian negotiator in talks with Israel that collapsed in April, told

⁵² "Iran says no difference between Israeli parties, all aggressors: Mehr", *Reuters*, March 18, 2015, text available at the Internet address <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/18/us-israel-election-iran-idUSKBN0ME16C20150318>

⁵³ K.F/M.H., "Newspaper Review: Netanyahu's No Palestinian State if Elected Statement Focus of Dailies", *Wafa. Palestinian News & Info Agency*, March 17, 2015, text available at the Internet address <http://english.wafa.ps/index.php?action=detail&id=28089>

⁵⁴ Not at all surprisingly, the idea of *not* operating *any* differences between different Israeli candidates and / or political parties is present *both* in Iranian and Hamas public statements (for the Iranian point of view see some lines above)

⁵⁵ M.N/M.H., "Newspaper Review: Israeli Elections' Results Focus of Dailies", *Wafa. Palestinian News & Info Agency*, March 18, 2015, text available at the Internet address <http://english.wafa.ps/index.php?action=detail&id=28096>

Voice of Palestine radio: “It is clear Israel has voted for burying the peace process, against the two-state choice and for the continuation of occupation and settlement”. Erekat openly recommends “to internationalize our [Palestinian] struggle for dignity and freedom through the International Criminal Court⁵⁶ and through all other peaceful means”. Wasel Abu Youssef, a Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) leader, told *Reuters*: “This makes it more necessary than ever to go to the international community, and to go to the ICC and escalate peaceful resistance and boycott against the occupation”⁵⁷.

One day later, on March 19, 2015, the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas declared that “what we heard from Netanyahu was very worrisome”, and also that “we have the full right to approach any international party in order to gain our rights and so international legitimacy will be achieved”⁵⁸. On the same day, the Palestinian press agency *Wafa* said the Palestinian *Al-Ayyam* newspaper “quoted PLO sources as stating” that the results of elections are proving that “Israel has chosen the path of racism and occupation and we call on the international community to support our quest at the International Criminal Court”⁵⁹.

On March 21, most probably speaking a lot about more or less newly designed *Palestinian initiatives aimed at putting significantly increased pressure on Israel by means of using, as many times as possible, international institutions of all sorts, and any other window of opportunity*, the *Al-Hayat al-Jadida* newspaper, quoted by *Wafa*, reports that “Chairman of the Palestinian Football Association Jibril al-Rajoub signed a draft resolution on the suspension of Israel’s membership in the next FIFA Congress”⁶⁰.

Over the weekend, on March 20-21, senior Arab political leaders made statements indicating the Arab League estimates that the *U.S. might not support any more Israel at the United Nations, a move which might lead the U.N. to adopt, possibly quite soon, a resolution*

⁵⁶ Most probably, by means of filing one or several charges against Israel at the International Criminal Court (ICC)

⁵⁷ Nidal AL-MUGHRABI and Ali SAWAFTA, March 18, 2015 (9:15 am EDT), “Palestinians want world pressure on Israel after Netanyahu win”, *Reuters*, text available at the Internet address <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/18/us-israel-election-palestinians-idUSKBN0ME1JS20150318>

⁵⁸ “Netanyahu 'still committed' to Palestinian statehood”, *Al Jazeera*, March 19, 2015, text available at the Internet address <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/03/netanyahu-committed-palestinian-statehood-150319213444662.html>

⁵⁹ K.F./M.H., “Newspaper Review: Palestinian, International Reaction to Israeli Elections Focus of Dailies”, *Wafa. Palestinian News & Info Agency*, March 19, 2015, text available at the Internet address <http://english.wafa.ps/index.php?action=detail&id=28106>

⁶⁰ K.F./T.R., “Newspaper Review: Netanyahu’s Efforts to Mend Ties with White House Focus of Dailies”, *Wafa. Palestinian News & Info Agency*, March 21, 2015, text available at the Internet address <http://english.wafa.ps/index.php?action=detail&id=28111>

asking for an immediate end of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. “There is an indication that the Americans are rethinking the Arab-Palestinian draft proposal for an end to the Israeli occupation that will be submitted to the Security Council”, the head of the Arab League, Secretary-General Nabil El-Araby, told the Egyptian daily *Al-Ahram*. Israeli media sources are also reporting that “the Arab League chief said that European governments have already expressed their readiness to approve resolutions. What is needed now is a US commitment to refrain from wielding a veto, which Washington will agree to on condition that the British and French governments offer an acceptable resolution”⁶¹.

Speaking about post-elections Israeli political decisions and actions directly connected to the Palestinian problem, we emphasize that some *Egyptian* diplomatic sources already told the Saudi newspaper *Okaz*, *Jerusalem Post* reports, that “what Netanyahu said during the election campaign [disavowing support for a two-state solution] is one thing, and what happens afterward is something entirely different. Netanyahu will not follow through with his threats due to the international situation”⁶².

According to open sources, influential voices in *Arab states in the Persian Gulf area* (including “an official of a Gulf Arab government wary of Tehran’s progress towards a nuclear deal with world powers”) say “Netanyahu owes his election win to Israeli security fears, notably about Iran’s growing regional influence”. Israeli media is quoting the Arab official who said: “With Iran emerging again, it was highly expected that Netanyahu would win”, and who described the Israeli Prime Minister as being “a man who believes strongly in protecting his people, and this is what Israel wants now”. Even more important, “Gulf Arabs identified with Israel’s fear of Iran’s influence, suggested Sami alFaraj, a Kuwaiti security adviser to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)”. AlFaraj also said that even if “without any sense of collusion with Israel, there is a feeling of affinity in the Gulf with Israel’s stance on curbing the influence of Iran in the area”⁶³. *Such reports can be regarded as being Arab reactions mixing confidence and even some positive attitudes (generated by the very fact that Arab Sunni states will go on having a*

⁶¹ Yasser OKBI / Maariv HASHAVUA, “US-Israel rift has Arabs optimistic over UN Palestine resolution”, *Jerusalem Post*, March 21, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Politics-And-Diplomacy/US-Israel-rift-has-Arabs-optimistic-over-UN-Palestine-resolution-394638>

⁶² For the fragment quoted here see Yasser OKBI / Maariv HASHAVUA, *op. cit*

⁶³ “Netanyahu owes win to jitters over Iran-Gulf official”, *Reuters*, March 18, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/18/us-israel-election-gulfarabs-idUSKBN0ME0UQ20150318> and also “Gulf official: Security fears over Iran gave Netanyahu election win”, *Jerusalem Post*, March 18, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-Elections/Gulf-official-Security-fears-over-Iran-gave-Netanyahu-election-win-394311>

strong and reliable partner in Israel, willing to deter and even confront Iran, if necessary) with disappointment and worries (generated by the statements made by Netanyahu in which he rejected the two-state solution for solving the Palestinian problem).

We also know that “various Syrian rebel group leaders” – heavily involved in intense fighting against troops loyal to the Assad regime, openly and massively backed by the Shiite Iran “have sent congratulatory messages to newly re-elected Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, according to an Israeli Druse who has acted as a go-between with Israel”, Israeli open sources report. They also say one important Syrian opposition political activist, Musa Al-Nabhan, in a letter sent “shared with The Jerusalem Post”, “addressed his congratulations to Netanyahu as well as newly elected Druse Likud MK Ayoub Kara”. The letter sent by the Syrian opposition activist tells the winners of the general elections in Israel: “We hope that your government will continue to provide the necessary support to the Syrian people, which are fond of you and looking to build the best of relations on all levels”⁶⁴.

d. The United Nations

On March 18, less than one day after the elections, the United Nations reacted to Netanyahu’s comments on the Palestinian problem. “U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon believes the peace process, including an end to illegal settlement building, is ‘the best and only way forward for Israel to remain a democratic state’, U.N. spokesman Farhan Haq told reporters”, *Reuters* reports. The same source says that Haq also declared: “It is incumbent on the new Israeli government, once formed, to create the conditions for a negotiated final peace agreement, with the active engagement of the international community, that will end the Israeli occupation and realize the creation of a viable Palestinian state, living in peace and security alongside Israel”. Quickly reacting to the U.N. Secretary-General reaction, Israel’s U.N. Ambassador Ron Prosor responded: “The United Nations may disagree with the policies of the Israeli government, but there is one fact that can’t be disputed - that Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East”. Prosor also added: “If the U.N. is so concerned about the future of the Palestinian people, it

⁶⁴ Ariel ben SOLOMON, “Syrian rebel groups congratulate Netanyahu on his election victory”, *Jerusalem Post*, March 20, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-Elections/Syrian-rebel-groups-congratulate-Netanyahu-on-his-election-victory-394565>

should be asking why President (Mahmoud) Abbas is in the tenth year of a five-year presidential term”⁶⁵.

5. Brief conclusions

As early as March 16, 2015, *Associated Press* estimated that as long as “the international community overwhelmingly supports the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank, east Jerusalem and Gaza Strip, areas captured by Israel in 1967, and opposes settlement construction”, Netanyahu’s “tough new position”, clearly expressed along the final days of the electoral campaign before the March 17 general elections, “is likely to worsen his already strained ties with his western allies if he is re-elected”⁶⁶.

Such an outcome is still possible. Most probably, *the next few months will be dominated by increased international pressures of all sorts on Israel. The EU, major European powers, the U.S, the U.N. are, together with some regional actors in the Middle East, clearly irritated by the statements delivered by Netanyahu at the end of the electoral campaign.* Also most probably, we estimate, *Netanyahu will try to decrease international pressures.* As long as *Iran is to be regarded, if we accept the very worried Israeli perspective, as a major lethal threat* (for such an interpretation, see also, for example, the sharply increased pace of military acquisitions in Arab Sunni states in the Persian Gulf region), no one can expect any *serious* Israeli concessions in this problem (just because *national survival cannot be negotiated*). The *only* remaining chance of reducing international pressures might be, for Netanyahu, that of pouring some new resources into negotiations with the Palestinians (and other actors within the Arab world), in order to prepare, if possible, *an effective revival of the two-state solution.* Most probably, Netanyahu is adequately equipped, politically speaking, for such a task. Not necessarily an easy or cozy one. But, clearly, *it is a task which can be accomplished.* It is, as far as we can understand, just a matter of coherent and powerful political will. Of *all* political actors involved.

⁶⁵ Michelle NICHOLS, “UPDATE 2-UN: Peace process only way for Israel to stay a democracy”, *Reuters*, March 18, 2015, at the Internet address <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/18/israel-election-un-idUSL2N0WK1R420150318>

⁶⁶ AP, “Netanyahu promises no Palestinian state if he is re-elected”, *New York Times*, March 16, 2015, text available at the Internet address http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2015/03/16/world/middleeast/ap-ml-israel-election.html?_r=0