WINDS OF CHANGE:

AN ANALYSIS OF THE ISRAELI ELECTIONS

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Winds of Change: An Analysis of the Israeli Elections

An election widely expected to be a comfortable formality for the Netanyahu government ends with a dramatic shift to the centre and an Israeli public sending a clear message of discontent

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite initial predictions that the government of Israel's sitting prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, would not only continue to dominate but also be strengthened, results have led the country into a highly fragile period of coalition negotiations, offering no clear single route to the formation of a coherent, stable government. They do, however, signify a dramatic shift in public position regarding electoral priorities. Social, economic and religion-and-state considerations now overshadow the historical dominance of the Arab-Israeli conflict as the central defining issue of Israeli politics.

The largest faction in the Knesset will continue to be that of the Likud-Beitenu party, headed by Netanyahu. While "Bibi" has clearly won an additional term as Prime Minister, the headline of this election is the second-place finish of Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid ("There Is a Future") Party. Lapid, a former journalist and senior news anchor who only entered the political field 12 months ago, offered a centrist platform with a strong campaign focus on domestic issues and a fresh, politically inexperienced party. The extent to which Lapid's success has confounded expectations is partially accounted for by polls that indicate that a full 34% of those who supported Yesh Atid decided on their ballot during the final 72 hours of the campaign.

Other major changes include the almost complete disappearance of Israel's former largest party, Kadima, and the strengthening of the right-wing "Jewish Home" and left-wing "Meretz" parties, leaving a tight balance between left and right in the political spectrum.

Netanyahu's weak showing, losing 25% of his electorate, has precipitated any number of potential coalition partners whose departure could threaten his ability to govern, leaving him vulnerable to both leadership challenges from within his own ranks and to coalition parties' demands in all areas. Although making political predictions in Israel is notoriously dangerous, the likelihood of elections again within 12-18 months is reasonable, especially given that any fledgling government will be immediately tasked with the biennial responsibility of passing a budget.

APCO's analysis provides an overview of the dominant issues in the run up to the elections, a detailed party-by-party breakdown of the results, an analysis of the immediate implications of these elections and a run-down of the most likely coalition scenarios. A summary of the Israeli electoral system is also included below.

BACKGROUND

Israel headed into its 2013 elections with a complex set of both domestic and foreign-policy issues for the electorate to consider.

On the domestic front, two key themes came to dominate the campaign – each of which allowed the candidates to encapsulate far-reaching sets of social issues into snappy Hebrew soundbites. The first of these is the "status of the middle class" – a concept borne into the national dialogue in the summer of 2011 when a group of young disaffected Tel Aviv residents set up tents on the city's trendy Rothschild Boulevard in protest against dramatic rises in the cost of living. This small act of defiance sparked a nationwide phenomenon of "tent cities" and consumer boycotts, which ultimately culminated in a protest attended by some 500,000 citizens; Israel's largest-ever public gathering. The subtext to this extended

far beyond spiralling property prices and the cost of groceries, it incorporated a spirit of rebellion against a government more concerned with the perceived Iranian nuclear threat than the price of basic commodities; a regulatory environment that allowed a small number of business 'tycoons' to establish vast commercial empires while heavily indebted to the banks; and the broad difficulties faced by the middle class.

Intrinsically linked to the socio-economic concerns above is the second key theme, "sharing the burden." The "burden" in question is that of mandatory military conscription for all Israeli youths. Israel's ultra-Orthodox and Arab minorities have been exempt from this obligation ever since the establishment of the state in 1948. Public resentment at this exemption has been predominantly focused on the ultra-Orthodox community, with a general acknowledgment that enlistment for Israeli Arabs invokes far wider social repercussions. Instead of serving within the military, ultra-Orthodox youths study in religious academies, subsidised by state handouts. "Sharing the burden" refers to a sense of resentment, long-held across the Israeli mainstream, at the lack of accountability and contribution from the burgeoning ultra-Orthodox community towards public life. Broadly speaking, ultra-Orthodox males continue with lifelong religious study rather than seeking employment, surviving off of state welfare funds and charitable donations. The community's schools teach a syllabus that focuses almost exclusively on religious study, neglecting to prepare children with the skills to become financially independent. Demographic growth trends, driven by high birth rates, have pushed the Israeli mainstream to challenge what has long been known as the 'Status Quo' agreement, which has pushed the ultra-Orthodox leadership itself into ever-more recalcitrant positions.
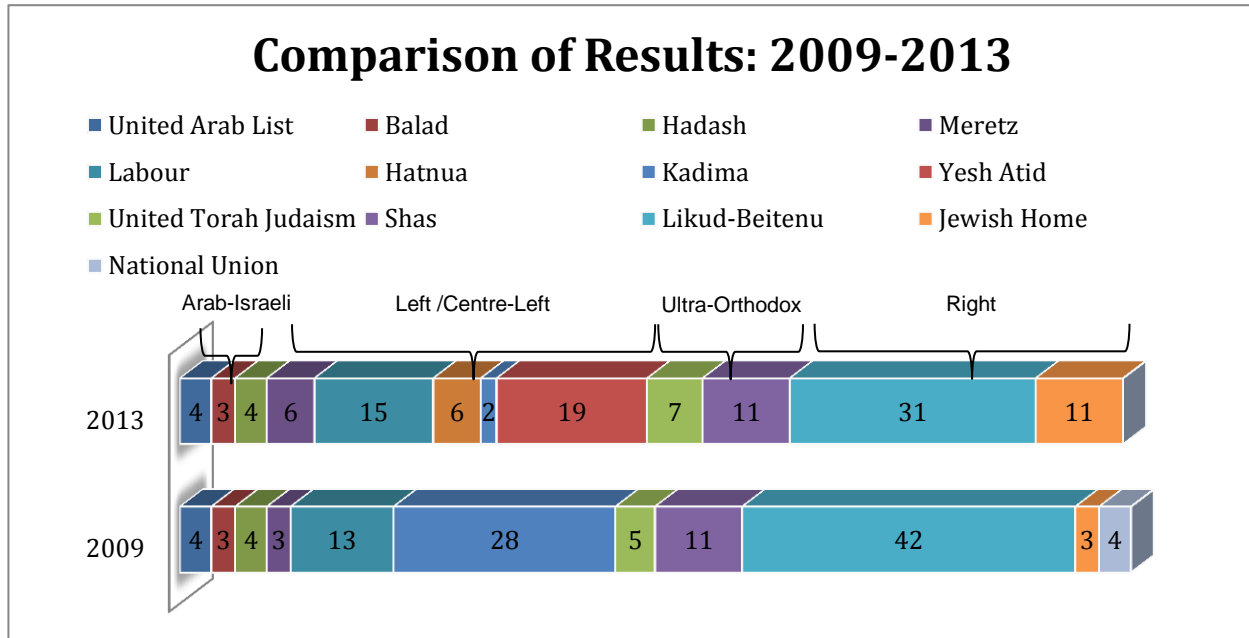
On the international front, those on all sides of the political spectrum have found themselves with no shortage of subject matter about which to disagree. The recent conflict with Hamas in Gaza, worsening relations with the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, the Arab Spring (specifically the Syrian uprising and the fall of the Mubarak government in Egypt), the Iranian nuclear threat and diplomatic friction with key allies (namely the U.S.) have all held the Israeli front pages at times over the past 12-18 months.

RESULTS

The pie-chart below details the distribution of the Knesset's 120 seats heading into the 19th session of Israel's parliament.
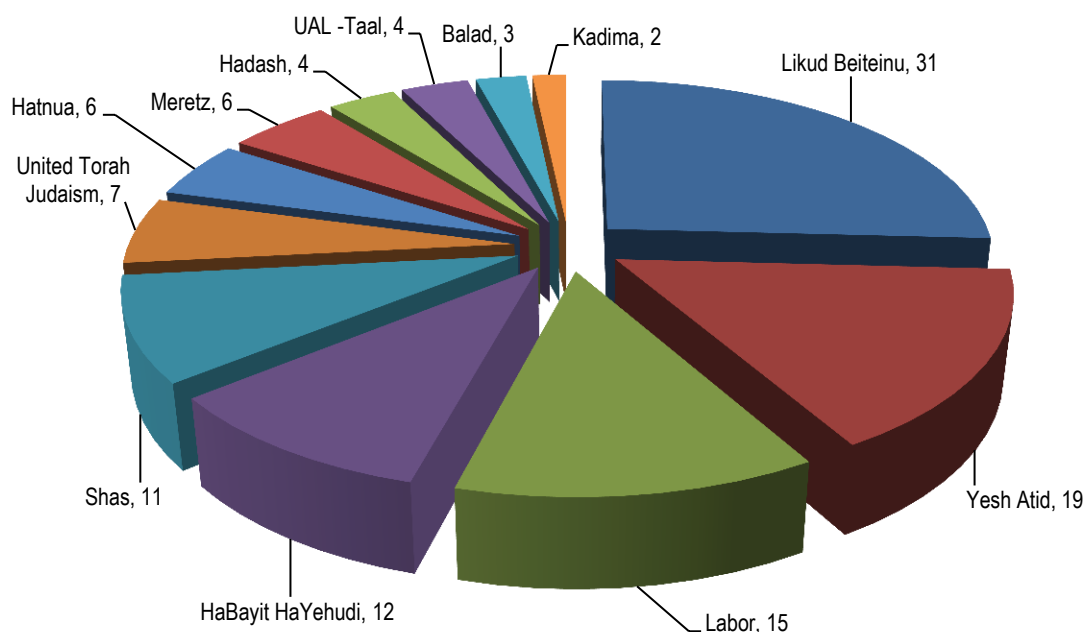
The graphic below indicates the comparative performance of each party against their 2009 results, organised on a political spectrum from left to right.

Comparison of Results: 2009-2013

- United Arab List
- Balad
- Hadash
- Meretz
- Labour
- Hatnua
- Kadima
- Yesh Atid
- United Torah Judaism
- Shas
- Likud-Beitenu
- Jewish Home
- National Union

| | Arab-Israeli | Left /Centre-Left | Ultra-Orthodox | Right |

2013: 4 3 4 6 15 6 2 19 7 11 31 11

2009: 4 3 4 3 13 28 5 11 42 3 4

The National Union party (four mandates in 2009) split into two factions during 2013. One faction subsumed into the Jewish Home and the other ran on a separate ticket and failed to pass the 2% threshold. Hatnua and Yesh Atid did not exist in 2009.

PARTY-BY-PARTY BREAKDOWN

In total 34 parties ran for election, of which 12 have crossed the 2% electoral threshold and will send representatives to the Knesset. A quarter of a million votes (7%) were cast in favour of the 22 parties that didn't pass the threshold.

Below is a rundown of the 12 parties entering the 19th Knesset and the number of Members of Knesset (MKs) each has:

Likud-Beitenu – 31 MKs

Led by PM Netanyahu, the largest party in the Knesset in fact comprises a joint list of the Likud and Yisrael Beitenu ("Israel is our Home") parties. In the outgoing 18th Knesset, the combined parties held 42 seats – 27 for the Likud and 15 for Yisrael Beitenu. Expectations of their leaders were that a united front for the two right-wing parties would allow them to push beyond their previous allocation. However, the campaign faltered from the outset and eventually returned just 31 seats (of which 20 are Likud members and 11 belong to Yisrael Beitenu). At the root of the poor display was a lacklustre campaign that failed to ignite regional Likud activists, who felt detached from the party leadership and disappointed at the symbolism of the merged list. The subsequent indictment of Yisrael Beitenu's leader, Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, on charges of breach of trust and fraud, coupled with a strong showing from rival parties (both Jewish Home to the right and Yesh Atid to the centre), all damaged the party.

Both parties endorse a hawkish approach to the peace process with the Palestinians, an aggressive stance towards Iran's nuclear ambitions and an unregulated free-market approach to the economy.

Yesh Atid "There Is a Future" – 19 MKs

Established only 12 months ago, Yesh Atid is the big success story of the 2013 elections. The centrist party was founded by the popular journalist Yair Lapid, son of a former Justice Minister. The party's central message of the need to "share the burden" (*i.e.,* ensuring that Israel's ultra-Orthodox contributes to society through conscription to the military and integration into the workforce), coupled with promises to ease the cost of living for the middle class and reform education, clearly echoed with the Israeli mainstream. Regarding the Palestinians, Lapid is a security-conscious, pragmatic advocate of a two-state solution, recognizing the role of territorial compromise within this process. However, his primary focus in government is likely to remain connected to social and domestic issues.

The Yesh Atid list, which is made up entirely of Knesset newcomers, consists of a diverse – though politically untested – range of educators, community activists, journalists, security figures and academics.

Labor – 15 MKs

The party of Israel's founding fathers, Labor governed the state for 29 years unbroken from its establishment in 1948 until 1977. Regarded as intrinsically linked to the Kibbutz (social communes) movement, the Histadrut Labor Union and the Oslo Peace Accords (signed by its then leader, former PM Yitzhak Rabin), Labor is the traditional party of the Israeli left. However, public anger at the failure of the peace process and a rightward swing among the electorate during the violent intifada years that followed led to the party losing influence throughout the past decade. Labor headed into the 18th Knesset with just 13 seats, which then dropped to eight when party leader and Defence Minister Ehud Barak left to form a splinter faction.

Led by the former journalist Shelly Yachimovich, Labor sought to conquer the middle ground in this election, introducing a socially democratic agenda and focusing primarily on internal social issues at the expense of the peace process. This move ultimately backfired as centrist voters were well catered-for by Lapid, while leftist voters, many of whom see peace efforts as their top electoral priority, felt abandoned by Labor and supported Meretz.

HaBayit HaYehudi "The Jewish Home" – 12 MKs

HaBayit HaYehudi is a far-right religious Zionist party committed to the idea of maintaining and developing a Jewish presence in the West Bank and rejecting all moves towards the establishment of a Palestinian state. The party is an outgrowth of the National Religious Party, which has moved far from its dovish roots over the past 30 years, alongside the hardline National Union faction. Throughout the campaign, the party appeared energized by its newly elected leader Naftali Bennett, a youthful and charismatic former commando in Israel's most elite army unit and former high-tech CEO. Bennett sought to widen the party's potential voter base by focusing on the party's mainstream domestic manifesto, arguing that questions of Palestinian statehood were unrealistic at present and that social matters were more pressing to the average voter.

In spite of polling at 13-15 seats during the final weeks of a broadly impressive campaign, a final tally of 12 seats still represents a success for the party, albeit a more modest success than previously hoped for.

Shas – 11 MKs

Shas is an ultra-Orthodox party representing the interests of traditional Sephardi Jews (*i.e.,* those with ancestry from North Africa and the Middle East). The party's all-male political leadership consists of a triumvirate of the Interior Minister Eli Yishai, Housing Minister Ariel Atias and the controversial figure of

Aryeh Deri – the charismatic former party hotshot who was convicted and jailed in 2000 for accepting bribes while serving Interior Minister. However, the ultimate source of authority within the party is its spiritual figurehead, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, a divisive 92-year-old Iraqi-born rabbinic scholar, widely derided by secular Israelis for his frequently controversial statements on a variety of Israel- and Jewish-related issues.

While the party presents itself as a social-welfare party driven by concern for the working class and the poor, its core issue is widely acknowledged by the secular parties as safeguarding the rights of its supporters to continue to avoid military conscription and to receive state subsidies for religious study.

United Torah Judaism – 7 MKs

United Torah Judaism (UTJ) represents the ultra-Orthodox communities of Ashkenazi Jews (*i.e.,* those who trace their ancestry back to Central and Eastern Europe). While the broad perception is that many supporters of Shas are in fact less religiously stringent than the party leadership (but support it for reasons of ethnic loyalty), UTJ's supporters live an exclusively ultra-Orthodox and Hasidic lifestyle. The majority of the party's electorate does not support the existence of the State of Israel, seeing it as the by-product of a European secular nationalism. However, they tacitly accept the State's existence and participate in elections so as to secure political representation that will allow them to preserve and secure maximal autonomy for their cultural way of life, fund their educational institutions and ensure tight rabbinic control over matters of religion and state. One of the key positions of the party is to avoid military conscription of its youngsters on the grounds that their contribution to the strength of the country is achieved through their lifelong study of Jewish texts.

Hatnu'ah "The Movement" (The Tzipi Livni Party) – 6 MKs

Former Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, who led the peace negotiations with the Palestinians during 2008, led the Kadimah Party to 29 seats in the 2009 elections. Despite being the largest party in the Knesset at the time, Livni was unable to form a government and opted not to serve in a right-wing coalition. As such, she headed the opposition during the outgoing Knesset, but was ineffective in this role, leading to a successful leadership challenge by former Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz. Following this, Livni announced her retirement from politics in March 2012, only to reappear in November 2012 under the Hatnu'ah banner. Livni recruited two former heads of the Labor party, both dejected at their party's perceived abandonment of the peace process, and sought to provide an alternative capable of challenging Netanyahu's premiership.

The focal point of the party platform was to revive efforts towards peace in the region and an immediate return to negotiations with the Palestinians, alongside a social agenda broadly similar to that of other parties on the centre-left. However, misgivings about Livni's past failure to take advantage of her 29 seats, in addition to an uninspired campaign, meant that the party polled poorly throughout and returned a disappointing six seats.

Meretz – 6 MKs

Heading into these elections with just three MKs, Meretz must be considered as another of its big victors, having doubled its tally to six. The party is the furthest left of the Jewish parties to have successfully crossed the electoral threshold. Its platform is built on putting an end to the Israeli occupation in the West Bank and giving top priority to negotiating a peace deal with the Palestinians, equality for Israel's Arab citizens, breaking the stranglehold of Israel's rabbinic establishment over social issues (such as civil and gay marriage), separation of religion and state, securing public transport on the Sabbath, and a heavy focus on human rights and environmental issues.

Ra'am Tal "United Arab List" – 4 MKs

United Arab List (UAL) supports the establishment of a Palestinian state, with its capital in Jerusalem, following the dismantlement of all Israeli settlements and a complete withdrawal to Israel's pre-1967

borders. The party endorses releasing all Palestinian prisoners from Israeli prisons and embracing the full right of return for all Palestinian refugees and their descendants. UAL campaigns for an end to all discrimination against Israel's Arab citizens.

Hadash – 4 MKs
Hadash, a Hebrew acronym for The Democratic Front for Peace and Equality, is a joint Jewish-Arab socialist party advocating for workers' rights, ethnic and gender equality, and the establishment of a Palestinian state on the basis of the immediate evacuation of all Israeli settlements and a complete withdrawal by Israel from all territories occupied as a result of the Six-Day War. As a result of its general Marxist aversion to nationalism, the party defines itself as non-Zionist, and its support of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict represents a pragmatic concession rather than an ideological comfort with the notion of nation states. Although still concerned with core socialist values, in recent years the party has moved away from its ideological roots and focused more centrally on the issue of equality for Israeli-Arab citizens and Palestinian independence.

Balad – 3 MKs
Balad, a Hebrew acronym for National Democratic Covenant, is the furthest left of the parties in the Knesset and strives towards transforming Israel from a "Jewish state" into a "state for all its citizens," alongside the establishment of a separate Palestinian state in the occupied territories, with its capital in Jerusalem. In line with the other Arab parties, Balad calls for the dismantlement of all Israeli settlements and a complete withdrawal to Israel's pre-1967 borders. The party supports a full right of return for all refugee Palestinians, support for Israel's Arab citizens and the nullification of the Zionist character of all public institutions and ceremonies. Balad's most prominent MK is Hanin Zoabi, the first Arab-Israeli woman to serve in the Knesset, who has caused widespread controversy in recent years by her outspoken support for Palestinian militants and her participation in the Gaza Flotilla of May 2010, which the Israeli government recognizes as a terrorist attack.

Kadima – 2 MKs
As mentioned with regards to the Tzipi Livni's Hatnu'ah party, the centrist Kadima party finished the 2009 elections as the largest party in the Knesset. However, following an ineffective three-year period in opposition, MK Shaul Mofaz successfully won the leadership from Livni in March 2012. Mofaz, who had previously emphatically dismissed the possibility of serving in a far-right coalition, subsequently accepted an offer from Netanyahu to take the party into government in May 2012, only to leave again just 70 days later. The party's credibility, already precarious after a disappointing return on the electoral mandate it received in 2009, was destroyed. Further damage was inflicted when Livni announced her comeback, prompting nine Kadima MKs to announce their intention to switch allegiances to her. The party narrowly managed to cross the electoral threshold solely on the basis of its campaign, which focused on Mofaz's security credentials as a former army Chief Of Staff and Minister of Defence.

ELECTION ANALYSIS

- **No rightward shift:** When elections were announced in October, the consensus among observers was that Prime Minister Netanyahu's right-wing religious-nationalist government was heading for an easy re-election. Soon after, following the Likud primaries in which moderate pragmatists were roundly displaced by hardline ideologues, and in the wake of the momentum generated by the Jewish Home party, commentators were predicting the most right-wing Knesset in the history of the State of Israel. The Likud-Beitenu campaign faltered badly, however, and the Jewish Home party appeared to peak at the wrong time, ultimately falling to 12 seats by Election Day. Predictions that Israeli society is moving en masse to the right proved to be unfounded. What can be said is that the parties on Israel's right have moved farther away from the centre ground, embracing ever more intractable positions on issues such as Palestinian statehood and relations with the Obama administration. Their voters, however, have not followed them.

- **Split down the middle or a change in the political narrative?** In recent years, Israelis have begun to group together their political parties into the right-wing bloc (comprising the nationalist and religious parties) and the left-wing bloc (comprising the centrist, centre-left, leftist and Arab parties). According to this system, the 120 seats of the 19th Knesset stand poised virtually even, at 61:59 (right:left). However, the distinction is false on a number of levels. It wrongly assumes that the two ultraorthodox parties – Shas and UTJ – will naturally gravitate to the right. In the past, each has embraced cooperation with the left in exchange for preferential treatment on core issues of importance to them. Equally, the ideological gaps between the non-Zionist Arab parties and the parties of the centre-left are no less distinct than those same gaps between the parties of the Zionist centre-left and right. In a political environment as complex as that of Israel, efforts to split the Parliament into two convenient factions are invariably reductive.

- **Prospects for peace:** The reason that the above right:left model no longer works is that it sees Israeli politics exclusively through the prism of each party's attitude towards peace negotiations with the Palestinians. On this occasion, the issue was secondary at best, and candidates from across the spectrum sought to avoid this most divisive of issues to be able to break out of their traditional voter groups. Bennett avoided the subject so as to not scare off potential new voters likely to be troubled by his hardline views on the matter. Lapid avoided the subject in order to focus on consensus centrist issues that better suit his crossover appeal. And Yachimovich, whose Labor party is entirely synonymous with the 1990's peace process, avoided the subject in an attempt to gain seats in the centre ground. Only Netanyahu, whose polling numbers show that Israelis trust him on security but are dissatisfied domestically, sought to broach the subject. Even he, though, did so carefully, to avoid clashes with extremists within his own party, for whom his positions are insufficiently hawkish. Although Lapid has set the resumption of peace talks as the second of his necessary preconditions for joining a Netanyahu government (behind universal draft legislation), he will struggle to force this goal past a doggedly resistant right-wing core of any eventual coalition. The likelihood of a more aggressive U.S. stance on peace negotiations from a White House unconstrained by the risk of re-elections will of course put pressure on any Israeli government to engage in earnest with the Palestinian leadership.

- **Social protest movement finally has its day:** Despite various subcommittee reports and government promises in response to the 2011 mass protests, general perception was that the movement failed to deliver tangible results. The ultimate achievement, however, of the social protests was that the central issue at stake throughout the 2013 elections was domestic socio-economic policy, rather than the Palestinian conflict. It is noteworthy that although it was the Labor list that contained two of the key leaders of the social protest movement, both of whom have now been elected, it was Lapid's Yesh Atid party that managed to take the domestic agenda and run with it.

- **Arab turnout:** For the first time since 2000, turnout among Israel's Arab population rose, reaching 56%, up from 53% in 2009. The three Arab parties received 11 seats among them, in addition to the election of Esawi Freige on the Meretz list. While the increased turnout did not lead to a greater number of seats (due to the increased turnout across the board, which pushed the threshold of votes needed per seat higher), it contradicts the prevalent opinion in both the Israeli and international media that voter apathy among Israeli Arabs had become endemic.

- **Female representation:** 26 of the new Knesset's 120 members will be women, marking the fifth consecutive election at which this figure has increased. At 22%, the rate of female participation in the Knesset will be equal to that of the UK, and ahead of the U.S. (18%). Given, however, that the ultra-Orthodox parties (18 seats) do not field female candidates, and that female Arab candidates often face heavy societal pressures not to involve themselves in politics, the rate of female MKs among mainstream Israeli society can be regarded as higher than the raw numbers indicate. This is all the more noteworthy given that Israel traditionally takes its political leaders

from the military, often equating political stature with the typically male-dominated hierarchy of Israel's combat forces.

POTENTIAL COALITION SCENARIOS

Centre-Right Alliance (70 seats)
A coalition consisting of Likud Beitenu, Yesh Atid, Jewish Home, Hatnu'ah and/or Kadima

- **Likelihood:** Reasonable. Lapid indicated that he will avoid entering a right-wing coalition as the sole representative of the centrist bloc, but will insist on taking another party from the bloc with him for additional leverage.

- **Peace process:** Tensions would abound between the furthest-left elements of the centrist parties and the hardline candidates from Likud Beitenu and Jewish Home.

- **Domestic:** Not inconceivable, were this government to overcome its gaping inconsistencies regarding the peace process, that it could legislate domestically with a high degree of coherence.

- **Stability:** It is difficult to see this coalition lasting much beyond the first efforts of either of its wings to either build settlements (on the right) or advance peace negotiations (on the left). The sole option for sustainable compromise – however remote – is that the government neither develops new settlements nor seeks to make concessions to the Palestinian leadership. This appears highly unlikely.

Centre-Right-Ultra-Orthodox Alliance (up to 76 seats)
A coalition built upon the Likud Beitenu, Yesh Atid (with either Hatnu'ah and/or Kadima), Shas and/or UTJ but NOT Jewish Home

- **Likelihood:** Slim. Mutual animosity between Lapid and Shas would make for a difficult coalition. It is likely that Lapid, who will be well-placed to dictate terms regarding coalition negotiations, will opt for Jewish Home (with whom he disagrees regarding the peace process but agrees on many social issues) over the ultra-Orthodox.

- **Peace process:** Theoretically this coalition could enter into peace negotiations, albeit with two major caveats. Netanyahu would face significant resistance within his own Likud-Beitenu bloc, and the ultra-Orthodox parties would need to receive significant domestic policy offsets in order to secure their support.

- **Domestic:** Yesh Atid's plans for enlistment of the ultra-Orthodox, in addition to demands that they teach core fundamental secular subjects within their schools and that housing subsidies for young families are distributed more equally towards the secular public, would all feature as prominent domestic issues.

- **Stability:** Chances that a coalition of this structure would be able to function are highly doubtful. The entire legitimacy of both Lapid and the two ultra-Orthodox parties is built on the ability of each to resist the domestic policy priorities of the other.

Narrow Right-Wing National-Religious Government (61 seats)
A coalition that echoes Israel's current government, headed by Likud Betenu, comprising the Jewish Home, Shas and UTJ

- **Likelihood:** Remote. Netanyahu will want to avoid such a narrow majority and has already voiced a preference for a broader coalition.

- **Peace process:** Highly resistant to all international pressure to cease settlement building and return to negotiations.

- **Domestic:** Likely to maintain the orthodox rabbinic stranglehold over areas of civic life, in spite of opposition from the Yisrael Beitenu elements of Likud Beitenu. Tension would abound between the two ultra-Orthodox parties and the wider coalition regarding universal conscription.

- **Stability:** Although Israel's current government has consisted of these partners (in addition to the new defunct Independence faction) and has maintained stability, the slimmest of all majorities would likely prove ungovernable given the scale of the policy challenges ahead.

Broad Centre-Right-Religious Coalition (up to 87 seats)

A government encompassing (up to all of) Likud Beitenu, Jewish Home, Yesh Atid (alongside Hatnuah and/or Kadima) and either UTJ and/or Shas

- **Likelihood:** Reasonable, at least in some form. Netanyahu's caution often leads him back to the ultra-Orthodox parties, from whom he can "lease" coalition loyalty in return for preferential treatment. However, Lapid, with the leverage of his 20 seats, would set highly restrictive constraints on his entrance into this set up.

- **Peace process:** Tensions would again abound between centre and right elements. Progress is unlikely.

- **Domestic:** The centrality of army conscription for the ultra-Orthodox to the Lapid campaign makes it unlikely that a partnership with both Lapid (a secular icon and outspoken critic of religious coercion) and the ultra-Orthodox (who will fiercely resist any efforts to conscript their youths) could thrive.

- **Stability:** Highly fractious; however, the breadth of the coalition would dictate that it could continue to govern even were one or more members to leave.

ISRAEL'S ELECTORAL SYSTEM

Israel has an electoral system based on nationwide proportional representation. According to this system, parties submit lists of their proposed candidates in preferential order and seats are allocated to each party in proportion to the number of votes that the party receives. As such, the voters vote for parties, rather than particular candidates on any given list. A party must pass the qualifying threshold – 2% of the popular vote – in order to be elected.

Parties are free to set their own mechanisms for the formation of their individual party lists. These include various primary systems, in which party members directly elect their candidates (*i.e.,* as in the case of the Likud and Labour); the use of nominated committees to construct the final list (Kadimah, on this occasion); and placing the entire decision within the hands of the party leader (Yisrael Beitenu, Yesh Atid) or a party elder (Shas, UTJ). Knesset elections take place once every four years. However, the Knesset or the prime minister can decide to hold early elections. The multi-party system and low-entry threshold means that no single party has ever been able to form a majority government. Rather, the parties are required to form coalition governments, which may contain elements with sharp ideological disagreements, resulting in frequent coalition instability.

Israel also has a president who is elected by the Knesset every five years. He or she essentially serves as a state figurehead with no direct legislative or executive function. The president's key role with regard

to elections is to decide which MK will be granted the opportunity to form a coalition. Historically, this MK has been the chairperson of the largest party elected. However, this person is also the one who the president regards as having the best chances of forming a governable coalition within a reasonably short time.

The president decides this after meeting with the heads of all elected parties, who each inform the president whom they would support as prime minister. Following the 2009 elections, Kadima became the largest single party, with 29 of the Knesset's 120 seats. Unusually, the party was regarded as less capable of forming a viable coalition than Likud, the second largest party. As such, President Shimon Peres, himself a member of Kadima when he was elected to his post in 2007, turned to Likud to form a government.

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