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Netanyahu's Election Loss: Reasons and Regional Consequences

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By Agha Hussain

Benjamin Netanyahu's 10-year continuous stint at Israeli Prime Minister is coming to an end, with his main rival the Blue and White Party led by retired ex-military Chief of Staff Benny Gantz securing more seats in the Knesset. [According to Jonathan Cook](#), reporting out of Nazareth:

'On paper, Gantz is best placed to form a government of what is preposterously labelled the "centre-left". But given that its backbone will comprise Blue and White, led by a bevy of hawkish generals, and Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu, it would, in practice, be nearly as right wing as Netanyahu's.'

Gantz used pictures of Gaza destroyed by Israel's 2014 assault and genocide there for his campaign promotion for the aborted elections in April. Having led the 2012 'Operation Pillar of Defense' and the 2014 'Operation Protective Edge' Gaza assaults, [he has bragged about the number of Palestinians he killed during it as the military chief](#). The 2014 operation according to UN figures killed 2,251 Palestinian, including 551 children.

Cook identifies Gantz as likely to form a majority government and states Netanyahu lacks the support from other former allies such as Avigdor Lieberman to attempt to create a national unity government which involves him as he desires.. Lieberman after the aborted elections in April refused to join religious and right wing parties pledging support to Netanyahu and formed his own party.

Reasons for Netanyahu's dwindling power may, however, owe to lost goodwill among Zionists in the US as opposed to Israel.

Netanyahu in recent times suffered a great loss vis a vis the Israel Lobby in the US, having lost his close friendship with billionaire casino magnate and top Trump campaign donor Sheldon Adelson. Adelson is credited with the Trump administration's 'recognition' of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and of the occupied Syrian Golan Heights as Israel's sovereign territory.

Adelson was behind Trump and Netanyahu's closeness and these two favours which Netanyahu presents as his achievements to Israeli Jews.

Adelson also owns Israel's largest newspaper *Israel Hayom*. He once [famously stated he was ashamed of his service in the US military and wishes he had served in Israeli military instead](#).

[Marsha Cohen writing for LobeLog](#) highlights that Adelson may have cut ties with Netanyahu last year and even testified this to Israeli police probing Netanyahu's corruption cases which he is likely to be indicted over in legal proceedings next month.

Along with Jared Kushner, Trump's son in law with a documented past [of using personal contacts to shape foreign policy](#), Adelson represented a vital connection between the US and Netanyahu. Kushner also had close familial ties to Netanyahu going back decades.

Netanyahu was revealed by corruption investigations in 2017 to conspire with Israel's second largest newspaper *Yediot Aharonot* to sabotage rival Adelson's *Israel Hayom* in exchange for favourable coverage for himself. Netanyahu thus alienated key Jewish allies in the US who are now likely searching for alternatives in Israel in anticipation of Netanyahu's indictments over corruption.

With instability in the White House and Israel, Israel's new first-time Gantz-led government will feel insecure due to the lessened coordination with the US. Military conflict with Gaza's armed groups whose rockets, missiles and mortars arsenal improves each year may become more likely as the new Israeli government attempts to show strength to conceal weakness and loss of key assets in the US.

Israel might also launch more airstrikes on Syria to demonstrate to its long time adversary in the Assad government that it has not been weakened by the aforementioned developments.

On the front of the enhanced ties with the Gulf Arabs (GCC), given Netanyahu's personal rapport with [Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia and Kushner in foreign policy projects](#) such as the Qatar embargo [and collaboration in the Yemen War](#), a new government in Israel may risk a slowing down of Israel-GCC normalization.

This normalization with the GCC, [devised by Kushner and Netanyahu and initiated with the UAE during the 2016 election campaign days](#), was important for Israel to attempt to form a unified front against Iran.

Iran, with whom the Syrian government has been aligned since 1979, has strategic presence near Israel's south (Gaza where it arms groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad) and its north (south Lebanon, where Hezbollah has grown politically and militarily more powerful since the Israeli occupation years of 1982-2000 which its efforts brought to an end).

The Israel-GCC alliance devised by Netanyahu and Kushner and maintained through personal rapport at the top level to Gulf monarchs is a reaction to Iran's increased influence and strategic depth and a new Israeli government sans Netanyahu may not have the same level of understanding.

Key projects such as the [proposed railway linking Saudi Arabia and the UAE to Israel's Haifa](#) port may be stalled and differences may result over Yemen due to [UAE's military draw-](#)

[down](#) there and Saudi's poor military performance. Conversely, Israel may also seek to escalate the situation in Yemen as a reaction to this to prevent the pro-Iran [and anti-Israel](#) Houthis gaining too much tract.

The recent Aramco attack, blamed on Iran by the US, may also be used to increase tensions in the Persian Gulf and attempt strikes on Iranian-affiliated groups in Iraq. This may well trigger retaliation against northern Israel from Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Overall, escalation throughout the region seems likely.

About Author: Agha Hussain is freelance editorial contributor with focus on Middle East affairs and Pakistani foreign policy.