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ISRAEL ELECTIONS: SECURITY REMAINS HIGH ON THE AGENDA

BENEDETTA BERTI

National security is an ever-present topic in the Israeli domestic political discourse. So it is not a surprise that the 2015 electoral campaign has been fought over two main issues: security and the economy.

The incumbent government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has gone through great pains to underline the complexity and magnitude of Israel's impending security threats: from a growingly more unstable neighborhood, to increasing state weakness across the Middle East, to the rise of more sophisticated non-state challengers, including Hamas, Hezbollah, and – perhaps in a not too distant future – the Islamic State. In addition, topping the PM's list of challenges, the Israeli government continues to stress the threat posed by Iran, its nuclear program, and its regional activism.

The current government has been adamant in arguing that, given the difficult nature of Israel's current security landscape, it is important for the country to pursue a realist and risk-adverse policy, prioritizing national security and thinking twice before taking unwarranted risks. For some of the PM's political allies, this argument is ex-

tended into a de facto reservation to move forward with the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In the 2015 electoral campaign, Netanyahu and his allies have relied on Israel's grim security landscape to warn the electorate against voting for what they have described as the 'more naive and less experienced' center-left political coalition. The PM has similarly stated that only he and his allies have the resolve, strength and necessary understanding to navigate Israel in the perilous Middle Eastern waters. In its electoral ads, the Prime Minister's party, the Likud, argue that the government has invested on keeping Israel safe, for example by building the massive border fence along the Egyptian border, by investing in the Iron Dome system, and by sending Hamas 'a strong signal' to deter it from attacking Israel.

The main opposition coalition, led by Labor Party leader Isaac Herzog and former Minister of Justice in the Netanyahu government Tzipi Livni, has also been investing significant political capital in highlighting both its competence and determination to tackle Israel's many security challenges. For example, the Herzog-Livni 'Zionist Camp' enlisted prominent former head of the military

Benedetta Berti, research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), Tel Aviv



intelligence Major General (ret.) Amos Yadlin to boost the list's 'security credentials.' At the same time, the opposition forces have been focusing on poking holes in Netanyahu's 'Mr. Security' narrative. Accordingly, the opposition has highlighted how, in the past few years, Israel's security has not significantly improved. First, they highlight how Iran remains an important challenge for Israel and, if anything, the Islamic Republic's leverage and influence have increased since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, with Iran now actively involved in both Syria and Iraq.

Second, the opposition coalition has been accusing the incumbent government of having been utterly unable to improve the situation with respect to Gaza, with Israel engaged in recurrent wars against Hamas; most lately in November-December 2012 and again in July-August 2014. With each round of confrontation failing to strategically change the situation on the ground, the Netanyahu government's policy on Gaza is used by the opposition forces to show the lack of long-term strategic thinking behind the incumbent government's security policy.

Third, the opposition forces have argued that the government's reluctance to engage in serious political nego-

tiations with the Palestinian Authority has led to a de facto political paralysis, creating a dangerous and explosive situation that both fuels resentment on the ground and weakens the Palestinian Authority. The opposition has been arguing that the focus on managing, rather than solving, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict reveals a lack of true leadership and will ultimately be detrimental to Israel's security. Finally, the opposition has strongly questioned the PM's record with respect to alienating some of Israel's international allies. In particular they have suggested that, by creating a public disagreement with the White House, the PM is risking to increase Israel's global isolation, with negative security repercussions.

There is little doubt that security has played a prominent role in this electoral campaign, with the main candidates' security credentials, experience and record deeply scrutinized by the media, the public and their political adversaries. Similarly, regardless of who will become Israel's next Prime Minister, a number of security issues - including Iran, regional instability, the rise of the Islamic State and the precarious situation in Gaza, among others - will be at the top of his/her agenda.