Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 29.10.2026 www.osw.waw.pl

Israel's election: Netanyahu set to remain prime minister

Marek Matusiak

On 27 October, Israel held elections to the Knesset. According to preliminary results, with 96% of the votes counted, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party came first, winning 26 of the 120 seats, ahead of Yashar (Hebrew for 'Straight'), led by retired general Gadi Eisenkot, which secured 21 seats. Eleven party lists crossed the electoral threshold, while turnout reached 77.7%, the second-highest in Israel's history. Parties supporting the prime minister won a combined 53 seats, compared with 48 for the opposition and a record 19 for Arab parties.

Although neither bloc secured the 61 seats needed for a majority, Netanyahu can be seen as the winner, as Likud and its political allies garnered more votes than the opposition. The forces opposed to Netanyahu remaining in power – the opposition and Arab parties – hold a combined majority of seats, but cooperation between them is unlikely because of anti-Arab prejudice, which has intensified since the Hamas attacks in 2023. Meanwhile, the Jewish opposition parties failed to win enough seats to take power on their own.

Commentary

- **Unless the final election results differ significantly from the preliminary figures (an unlikely prospect), Netanyahu will remain Israel's prime minister for the foreseeable future.** Two scenarios appear most plausible: an attempt to form a national unity government led by Netanyahu that includes part of the opposition, or another parliamentary election in the first half of next year. The likelihood of another war with Iran is also growing. Netanyahu could use such a conflict to pressure the opposition into cooperating in the face of a crisis. In the event of another election, Netanyahu would hope for lower turnout among opposition and Arab voters (turnout among the latter reached an unprecedented 80%). The formation of a minority government by the opposition, with the support of one Arab party and the abstention of the other, is mathematically possible but politically unlikely. The same applies to the hypothetical possibility of these forces cooperating to jointly elect the speaker of the Knesset and pass legislation that would bar Netanyahu from serving as prime minister because of the criminal charges against him.
- **Although the election followed the Knesset's first full term since the 1980s (which might suggest political stability), it actually took place amid unprecedented tensions and polarisation.** Since 2022, Israel has experienced a succession of crises: mass protests against attempts to weaken the judiciary, the Hamas attack of 7 October 2023, a two-year hostage crisis (251 people were abducted during the attack), a retaliatory

invasion of the Gaza Strip and military campaigns against Hezbollah in Lebanon and against Iran, resulting in repeated strikes on Israeli territory. Throughout that time, the country has remained under an ultranationalist government whose members have not only openly employed racist rhetoric, including genocidal rhetoric directed at Palestinians in Gaza, but have also supported Jewish terrorism in the West Bank and the way the war in Gaza was conducted. The International Criminal Court subsequently issued arrest warrants for Prime Minister Netanyahu and former Defence Minister Yoav Gallant over alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity committed during the conflict. Furthermore, Netanyahu has been on trial since 2020 on charges of corruption and abuse of office.

- **Political passions and deep societal polarisation did not translate into significant differences between the parties' election platforms.** The Israeli political landscape is shaped primarily by personalities (put simply, being 'for' or 'against' Netanyahu) and issues such as the role of religion in the state. On the Palestinian question, regional policy, security, foreign policy and responses to international criticism of Israel, the main political forces – both in government and in opposition – differ only in minor respects.
- **Since 2009, Netanyahu has not only dominated Israeli politics but also defined the parameters of political debate and established a model of leadership that his opponents seek to emulate.** This is particularly evident in the complete delegitimisation of Arab parties as participants in the political process, both before and, even more so, after 7 October 2023. The widespread acceptance of this view among much of the public and the political establishment has effectively tied the opposition's hands when it comes to cooperating with these parties.
- **The lack of a clear electoral outcome, particularly as the result leaves the initiative in Netanyahu's hands, has increased the risk of another military confrontation with Iran.** The Israeli prime minister has repeatedly demonstrated his willingness to exploit security issues for domestic political purposes. This was evident, for example, when he deliberately escalated the war in the Gaza Strip or effectively scuppered emerging opportunities to secure the release of hostages during the conflict, as any such agreement would have required a cessation of hostilities. According to unconfirmed reports, Netanyahu had also planned to launch an attack on Iran immediately before the latest parliamentary election, but was prevented from doing so by Chief of the General Staff Eyal Zamir.