

# The Arab Spring

• By ITAY TSAMIR

Three weeks ago, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu scribbled his campaign strategy in black marker on an erasable board. In the absence of a war or any other super-dramatic event, it may become the decisive issue on the table until the elections.

He jotted down four numbers:

36: (Blue and white)

10: (Peretz and Meretz)

7: (Lieberman)

And the additional number: 53, which cannot form a government.

Absent from his count, as well as from several other strategic junctions in the country, was the Joint List. However, they are not actually absent from their influence over the identity of the next prime minister, as attested to by the three previous election campaigns.

The Joint List was established in 2014, when the law initiated by Avigdor Lieberman to raise the election threshold was passed. The Arab parties that until that time ran separately, thus not constituting a significant force, decided to unite. Overnight they became the third largest party in Israel, and won 13 mandates.

In the 2015 election, without even knowing, they flocked to the polls just hours before they closed, in what went viral and became one of the most memorable video clips in Israel's voting history. The maneuver later became known as the "gevald campaign."

Netanyahu, who over the years had upgraded his abilities from excellent control of marketing tactics to nearly

total control of digital tactics, uploaded a live video on Facebook; a tactic then considered less familiar in Israeli politics. It did, however, suit Netanyahu, who first identified it as a perfect fit.

The video won widespread exposure in the media, and was also spread via five million SMS messages, managing to push tens of thousands of apathetic voters from their homes to rush to the polls to prevent the "danger" posed to the reign of the Right. Netanyahu went on to win a crushing victory. He was also subject to wall-to-wall criticism, in Israel and internationally, including from then-president Barack Obama, and subsequently apologized to the Arab citizens, several days after results went public.

In the first round of elections in 2019, the Joint List was as yet unable to agree on running together, and the Arab parties ran on two different lists. The success of the 2015 gevald campaign led the prime minister to recreate it with a vengeance, in an onslaught of live Facebook broadcasts combined with a new and more targeted tool of Chatbot ("BibiBot") that described the Left's deal with the Arab parties.

THIS TIME, the prime minister was careful not to address the Arab citizens overtly, and chose instead to focus on the Arab parties. Then on Election Day, Arab voters were surprised by cameras at the polls. The strategy of a heightened digital gevald campaign and an attack on the Arab parties, instead of the citizens, combined with the cameras placed so surprisingly at the polls, proved itself.



AYMAN ODEH, leader of the Joint List, gestures as he hands out pamphlets during an election campaign event in Tira. (Reuters)

The Arab voters stayed home and the Arab parties slumped from 13 mandates to 10. The Right bloc, without Lieberman, rose from 58 to 60 mandates. Netanyahu was missing a single mandate to form a government, and if not for Lieberman pulling the rug out from under him, could now have been the chosen prime minister for nearly a year, rather than prime minister of a transitional government.

The disappointment of not obtaining the desired 61 mandates and forming a government, along with the renewed unity of the Joint List during the second round, forced Netanyahu to change strategies and to further radicalize his 2015 position. The Likud Party made a supreme effort to promote the Camera Law, build-

ing an entire campaign around it.

The Joint List seized the opportunity to rouse their voters and turn the Camera campaign to their own benefit. This climaxed when Ayman Odeh, the head of the Joint List, went over to the prime minister during a parliament deliberation on the Camera Law, and pushed his telephone camera in front of him.

The picture of the pair, a kind of modern paraphrase of David and Goliath, was leveraged by the Joint List's campaign, using digital tools. It went nearly as viral as Netanyahu's 2015 live video campaign, and became one of the turning points in that election campaign. Vengeance was served up cold, and even on a similar plate: The Arab voters, encouraged by the reunification of the Joint List and angry at the prime minister's attitude toward them, flocked to the polls to vote.

The Joint List increased back to 13 mandates and the Right bloc was significantly distanced from the ability to form a government, falling to a mere 55 mandates. Netanyahu was hard hit on the very field that he had set up and which he had previously controlled, more than any other politician in Israel, or even perhaps in the world.

With the onset of the third round, it seems that Netanyahu has learned the lessons from the previous rounds and has tried to return to the strategy from the first round: indirect attack.

THE CHOSEN approach, premiering on journalists' Twitter and Telegram tweets with the photo of the famous erasable board, proclaimed, "Gantz has no government without the Joint List" – a very careful approach that did not even mention the word "Arabs." However, this specific approach had apparently not proven effective. The terminology of "The Joint List" was perhaps not sufficiently clear to Netanyahu's target audience.

The next attempt was to focus on an individual rather than on a party. "Gantz has no government without Bibi." Apparently, Netanyahu's target audience does not find Odeh sufficiently threatening, hence the choice of Bibi. However, Bibi is a double-edged sword. Bibi has a long-term relationship with him, including not only downs, but also ups (see the tweet by Amit Segal).

At the time of this article, Blue and White has not yet seen fit to take advantage of the Bibi-Bibi connection in order to topple Netanyahu's new line of defense (Lieberman has, in fact, taken advantage of the Bibi-Bibi connection in a clip that is making the rounds of the media). If they do, Netanyahu may try to leverage the High Court's decision to overturn Hiba Yazbek's disqualification, and focus on her.

In the meantime, even if Netanyahu's line of defense is not entirely precise, his strategy has managed to determine the agenda: Blue and White has been dragged into reaction; they have shrugged off the Joint List and declared that they will not sit with them in any type of constellation.

Will Netanyahu be able to hold himself back from flooding the social media with anti-Arab sentiment once again, at least until the polls are closed? Will the Likud have a new trick up its sleeve at the polls, to replace the cameras from the first round? Will the Joint List succeed in finding a way – in the field, in digital media or a combination of both – to once again coax its voters out to the polls? And to what extent will this influence the identity of the next prime minister?

The picture will undoubtedly come clear even before the first buds of spring. What is certain, however, is that the days when it was possible to ignore or devalue the influence of the Arab vote on the results of the Israeli elections are long gone, never to return.

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