

CRS Insights

Israel After the 2015 Elections: What Does Netanyahu's Victory Mean for U.S. Policy?

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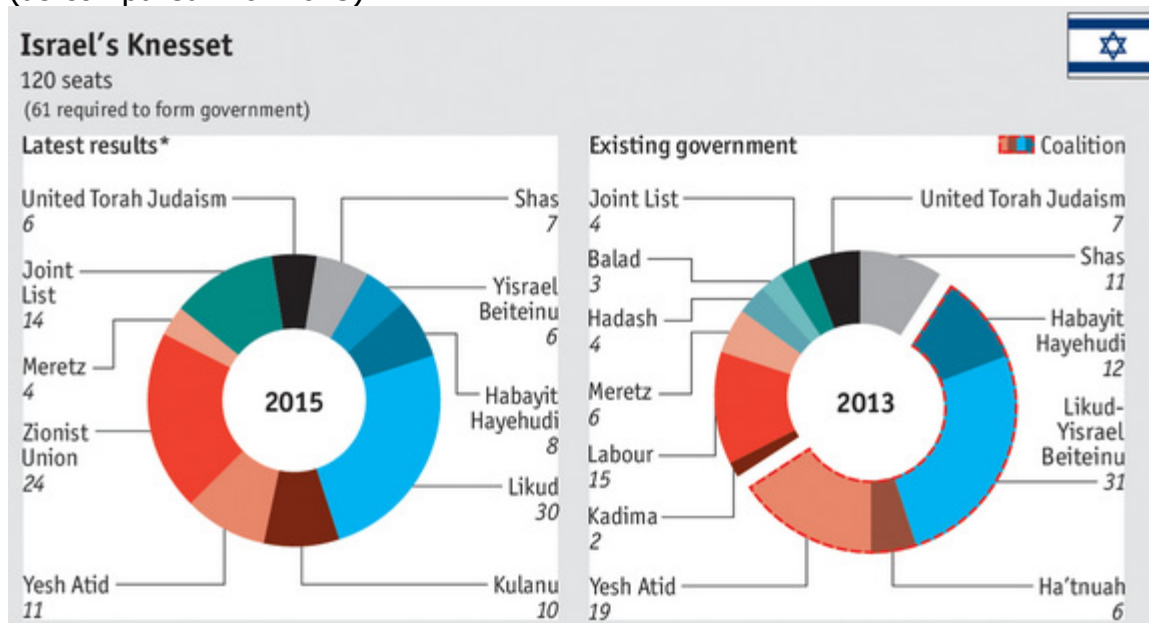
The Israeli Knesset elections held on March 17, 2015, were a subject of significant interest for the United States. The leading candidates openly differed on how to manage disagreements with the United States and the international community on various matters, though how that might have translated into substantively different policy stances is unclear. The timing and manner of official Israeli statements and actions influence regional and international attitudes and developments, and may shape how the Obama Administration and Congress work together and with Israel on these issues. Since the beginning of March 2015, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu has

- [spoken assertively at a joint meeting of Congress](#) in opposition to the presumed parameters of a possible diplomatic agreement on Iran's nuclear program;
- [appeared to renounce](#) his [previously expressed willingness to accept](#) the creation of a Palestinian state, before [claiming shortly after the election](#) that he still supports a "two-state solution" in principle but not under current realities;
- declared that foreign sources were funding and advising [Israeli left-leaning](#) and [Arab groups](#) in an effort to unseat him, amid evidence of [substantial private American support](#) for both Netanyahu's right-of-center Likud party and its main rival—the left-of-center Zionist Union.

Likud finished with a six-seat advantage over the Zionist Union, which was particularly striking because Likud had trailed by four seats in final pre-election polls. [Many commentators attribute Likud's win at least partly to statements by Netanyahu](#) in the final days of the campaign to persuade right-leaning voters to choose Likud over smaller parties in order to prevent Zionist Union from taking power. To some extent, such statements may have been calculated to [counter media reports](#) that Netanyahu had [previously considered making concessions to the Palestinians](#).

Figure 1. 2015 Election Results

(as compared with 2013)



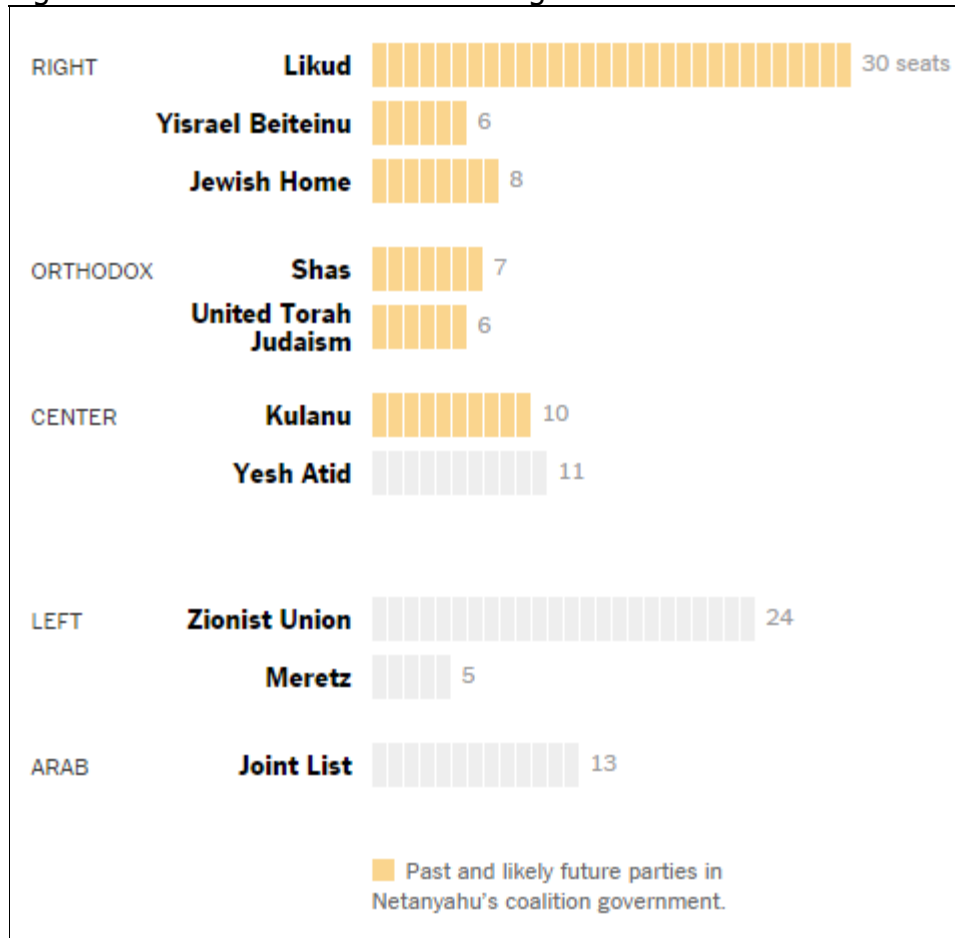
Source: Economist.com (citing Haaretz.com and Knesset)

Note: See <http://static.bicom.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/israels-partys-2015.pdf> for more information on Israeli parties.

Under the [laws governing](#) Israel's [multi-party parliamentary system](#), within seven days of the publication of election results, Israeli President Reuven Rivlin will assign the person he determines to be best-positioned to form a majority coalition—most likely Netanyahu—to do so within 28 days, with a possible 14-day extension at Rivlin's discretion.

Netanyahu appears to be poised to form a government with the support of various parties seen as [natural Likud coalition partners](#) (see **Figure 2** below). The recommendation of Kulanu's Moshe Kahlon that Netanyahu form the government has presumably delivered Netanyahu the majority support he needs without him having to court left-of-center parties. Kahlon gained notoriety as a member of Likud for helping liberalize the mobile phone market as communications minister in the Netanyahu-led government from 2009 to 2013. A [common analytical view](#) is that Kahlon, who [reportedly left Likud because of differences with Netanyahu](#), is nevertheless inclined to join the government to gain greater experience and prominence, probably in return for influence over the new government's socioeconomic agenda and the post of finance minister.

Figure 2. Probable Israeli Political Alignments



Source: nytimes.com

Expectations by U.S. officials and other actors that a new Netanyahu-led government is likely to have a rightward orientation on various national security issues are reportedly affecting the calculations of and [options being weighed by U.S. officials](#) and other actors on a number of subjects, including:

- Overall U.S.-Israel Relations:** In recent months, longstanding policy differences between President Obama and Netanyahu have become increasingly public, most prominently over Netanyahu's March 3 speech to Congress on Iran, and [now over Netanyahu's stance on a two-state solution](#). There is no indication that U.S. security assistance for and cooperation with Israel will be affected. However, it may be difficult to discern whether and how [public bilateral disagreements on key issues](#), to the extent they persist or intensify, are driven by divergences in

how the countries broadly assess their respective national interests, or by contrasting views and personalities among specific leaders or groups.

- **Iranian Nuclear Issue:** The "P5+1" and Iran are continuing negotiations focused on reaching a political framework for a comprehensive agreement by March 31 (see CRS Report R43333, [Iran: Interim Nuclear Agreement and Talks on a Comprehensive Accord](#)), with the deal to be finalized by the end of June. Netanyahu continues his outspoken opposition to the expected parameters of the potential deal. It is unclear to what extent Israel will seek to influence action on the issue, and, if so, where it will choose to focus. Will it seek to obstruct a deal entirely, influence specific terms (Iranian nuclear infrastructure, enforcement of the deal, punishment of potential violations, conditions attached to the deal's probable expiration), encourage stronger congressional review, or strengthen or maintain sanctions? What means will Israel use to make its case, and will it resume hinting at possible unilateral military action?
- **Palestinian Issues:** Netanyahu's statements before and after the campaign regarding a potential Palestinian state, and U.S. and international responses to those statements, have further complicated Israeli-Palestinian relations. Contention persists and has in some cases deepened over [possible curtailment of security cooperation](#), questions regarding [the Palestinian Authority's fiscal and political stability](#), Israeli [settlement construction](#), and Palestinian actions vis-à-vis the International Criminal Court (see CRS Report RL34074, [The Palestinians: Background and U.S. Relations](#)).

In a March 19 [congratulatory call](#) with Netanyahu, President Obama reportedly told him that he values the "deep and abiding partnership" between the two countries. However, the President gave an [interview](#) shortly thereafter in which he said, "We take him [Netanyahu] at his word when he said that it [the creation of a Palestinian state] wouldn't happen during his prime ministership, and so that's why we've got to evaluate what other options are available to make sure that we don't see a chaotic situation in the region."

The Administration appears to be considering options to minimize Israeli-Palestinian crises and maintain U.S. preeminence internationally in promoting a peace process. [White House officials have been cited in media reports as saying](#) that the United States might consider supporting a potential U.N. Security Council resolution that uses pre-1967 armistice lines as reference points for negotiating Israeli-Palestinian borders. In March 19 congressional testimony, [one Administration official](#) appeared to deny these reports. [The United States has routinely](#) blocked or stood against U.N. initiatives opposed by Israel.