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Israel: *Domestic Troubles*

Stavros Drakoularakos *

2014 is the year in which old and new challenges will arise for Israel. As the state heads towards the 66th anniversary of its independence, it faces roadblocks that – in a nutshell – impede the urgency of its finding a solution for its political, financial and refugee crisis. This article lays out the current major issues that confront Israel, prompting a discussion of potential avenues which it can pursue as it heads towards its elections.

* Researcher of the Centre for Mediterranean, Middle East and Islamic Studies of the University of Peloponnese.

The Coalition and the Presidential Election of June 2014

On the 13th of January 2014, former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was laid to rest after 8 years of being in a comatose state. At the same time, current President Shimon Peres – a little over 90 years old – is effectively set to retire after the end of his presidential term in May 2014, despite an opinion poll showing that 63% of Israelis would prefer him to remain in office.¹ These two political figures were called “the last giants” of the founders’ generation in the Israeli political scene. Currently, the Israeli government, which is traditionally based on a coalition of parties, is led by Likud party Chairman and Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin “Bibi” Netanyahu, who is in his third term but is lacking in popular support.² His coalition-government was formed and maintained by the alliance of five parties: Likud (“The Consolidation”), Yisrael Beitenu (“Israel Our Home” led by Minister of Foreign Affairs Avigdor Lieberman), Bayit Yehudi (“The Jewish Home” led by Minister of Industry, Trade and Labor Naftali Bennett), Yesh Atid (“There is a Future” led by Minister of Finance Yair Lapid) and Hatnua (“The Movement” led by Minister of Justice Tzipi Livni). This particular political merger caused several headaches for the Prime Minister: Binyamin Netanyahu had to bridge the gap between parties despite their lack of common agendas on issues such as negotiations with the Palestinian Authority or on social-economic issues.³ This lack of cohesion became all the more prominent in the last few months during talks for the Iranian Nuclear pact, discussion of the heated relationship with Lebanon, and the renewed US diplomatic efforts led by US Secretary of State John Kerry to move the dialogue with the Palestinian Authority forward.⁴ As for situation within parliament, there is now a total 34 political parties for 120 seats in the Knesset, while parties like Likud and Yisrael Beitenu lost the electoral power they held in 2009.⁵ The most recent crack in the government seems to arise from growing tensions between Binyamin Netanyahu and his Minister of Industry, Trade and Labor Naftali Bennett (from the Jewish Home Party), around negotiations with the Palestinian Authority, which effectively puts the unity of the government to the test.⁶ The sole political figure who is seemingly secure in his position remains to be Binyamin Netanyahu, who despite severe criticisms looks to be the only remaining candidate suited for the premiership. For a vast majority of the population, it is practically a case of better the devil you know than the devil you don’t.⁷

Presidential candidacies and campaigns for the Presidential Election that will be held on June 14th 2014 are the new order of the day and, as is the case in most political systems, tensions are running high while foreign and domestic policies suffer as a result.⁸ The Israeli administration’s opposition is mainly represented by the Labor Party (led by Isaac Herzog) and the Shas Party (“Sfarad’s guards of the Torah led by Arie Deri”), the former being a social-democratic political party and the latter representative of Mizrahi interests and part of previous coalitions. The number of presidential candidates is increasing steadily – even if it is mostly a ceremonial position - with the most prominent ones being Reuven Rivlin (Likud), Binyamin Ben-Eliezer (Labor) and 2011 Nobel Prize Laureate for chemistry Dr. Dan Schechtman. Such is the turmoil in the Israeli political scene, that even an endorsement from the Prime Minister is by no means a given for an electoral victory, some journalists declaring it even detrimental to one’s candidacy.

Iran, the Settlements and the United States

In their campaigns, party leaders within the Israeli government and members of the opposition have been reverting to their parties’ core beliefs in an effort to widen their

electoral base, engaging in discourse that paves the way for international misfires and domestic political conflicts that deteriorate the country's geopolitical standing.⁹ The relationship with the United States is becoming strained, with Israel portraying a tough international stance by vilifying the Geneva Pact with Iran (freezing parts of the Iranian nuclear program in exchange for the lifting of economic sanctions) and going back and forth on the progression of negotiations with the Palestinian Authority.¹⁰ For example, on January 10th 2014, Israel officially announced the construction of 1,400 settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. This number has increased from 829 to 1,400 since it was first announced that it was in the works in November 2013.¹¹ One should take note of the fact that on November 13th 2013, Israel had stated its decision against going forward with further settlements in an effort to get the international community to side with it on the Iranian nuclear issue. The decision to move ahead with the settlements can be considered to be a result of the signing of the nuclear pact with Iran a few months earlier and the release of 26 long-serving Palestinian prisoners on December 30th 2013. This back and forth appears to be deeply rooted in the lack of a cohesive stance in the domestic political arena, as well as within the current administration and a clear misreading of the current trends of the foreign policy of the United States regarding the Palestinian issue (mainly restarting the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations on stronger bases).¹² Needless to say, the current clash of political allegiances and grievances in the Israeli political forum is resulting in severe ramifications internationally.¹³ Israel is gradually losing its credibility as a strong dependable actor for the United States in the Middle East, while its adversaries - Turkey and Saudi Arabia - are slowly but steadily becoming more reliable partners.

Holot: an open prison for African migrants

Nowadays, more than 120,000 Ethiopian and Sudanese Jews live in Israel, 80,000 of whom were born in Africa. A large majority of them have been victims of discrimination by Israeli society. Case in point, the recent incident on December 11th 2013, in which Knesset member Pnina Tamano-Shata was deemed ineligible for blood donation because she had immigrated to Israel from Ethiopia at age three.¹⁴ A new problem that has come to the forefront is the large waves of African migrants that have been arriving in Israel through Egypt. Based on this, a law was adopted on December 10th 2013 authorized the opening of the Holot ("sands") detention center for African refugees in the Israeli desert. Capable of holding up to 3,000 persons, that number could go up to 11,000 if the facilities were to be expanded. Detainees are allowed to leave the facility – hence its designation as an "open prison" – but must be present for three roll calls during the day and are unable to obtain legal work permits in Israel.¹⁵ It should also be noted that the current anti-infiltration amendment allows the state of Israel to detain people entering the country clandestinely in Holot indefinitely.¹⁶ This is part of a larger Israeli effort that aims to expulse 60,000 Eritrean and Sudanese Africans who arrived in Israel illegally through Egypt to request political refugee status only to have their applications systematically denied. Between the large number of illegal migrants entering Israel and the political instability in Egypt and the Islamist attacks on Israeli territory, in 2013 Israel found reason to build a large electrified fence along the 230 km Israeli-Egyptian border. Although, the migrant flow has effectively stopped, the presence of Eritrean and Sudanese refugees is viewed – mostly by the right wing and ultra-orthodox – as being detrimental to Israeli society and as a threat to the state's social makeup. It is even becoming common for Africans to be designated as "infiltrators". This point of view is evidenced by the Prime Minister's statements in 2013 in which he indicated

that Israel would continue encouraging migrants to leave and try to find countries to accept them, pointing out that 2,600 had left in 2013 and that in 2014 more would be removed.¹⁷ It is of note that the vast majority of these refugees are unable to return to their country of origin since they would face war or persecution. Therefore, Israeli efforts to persuade them to leave voluntarily by giving out monetary sums of \$1,500 to \$3,500 have been met by deaf ears. By January 2014, only 700 refugees had left Israel through this particular program, likely more as a result of living under strenuous conditions rather than of their willingness to leave. This situation prompted the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) to scold Israel for causing “hardship and suffering” and for not complying with the 1951 UNHCR Convention on Human Rights which directs the proper treatment of refugees and asylum seekers.

At the start of January 2014, Eritrean and Sudanese refugees were demonstrating in Tel-Aviv while also going on a three-day strike – this of course only applying to those lucky enough to find work. However, their demand for humane treatment was met with a number of demonstrators being sent back to the “open prison”.¹⁸ Although human rights activists and left-wing politicians have denounced the unjust treatment of African refugees and have attempted to provide some relief to help the migrants, the current situation does not look like it will be resolved in the near future.¹⁹

The Draft of Haredi Jews

Since the Tal Law of 2002, Haredi men – the ultra-orthodox - could be exempted from the Israeli military service due to their religious studies. But now, the government is slowly but surely moving ahead with their enlistment in the Israeli Defense Force (IDF). The enlistment initiative started in the summer of 2013 and has culminated in the “equal burden” bill that is to be voted on by the members of the Knesset in March 2014. The current draft of the bill lists the procedures with which the Haredim will enlist in the military or national service, targeting men between the age of 18 and 24, but failing so far to list the sanctions related to draft-dodging.²⁰ The military service enlistment reform’s objective is to “share the burden” of protecting the “Jewish state” and to avoid putting religion above all else. This directive has led to many demonstrations and protests by the ultra-orthodox community in Jerusalem and other cities where the Haredim population is significant.²¹ In an effort to support the adoption of the bill in March 2014, Minister of Finance Yair Lapid decided to freeze funding for draft-dodging students at Yeshiva - a religious educational institution – which served to further anger the ultra-orthodox community, making them even more determined to fight against enlistment.²²

As Israel struggles to find a new modus vivendi on the domestic as well as on the international front, it remains particularly oblivious to the notion that solidarity, equality for all and abiding to international customs and procedures were and are still the keys to its survival and its evolution. The current political standstill needs to be sorted out sooner rather than later, while Israeli interests continue to be shared by their traditional allies and while the very fabric of the Israeli society still holds together.

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