

### Engraving politics: antagonisms of social protest and peace in 2015; Israeli legislative elections

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Helled, A. (2017). Engraving politics: antagonisms of social protest and peace in 2015; Israeli legislative elections. *Studia Politica: Romanian Political Science Review*, 17(2), 309-329. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-55884-1>

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# **Engraving Politics**

## **Antagonisms of Social Protest and Peace in 2015**

### **Israeli Legislative Elections**

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#### *Introduction*

Israeli politics has undergone radical changes as a result of both geopolitical contingencies (i.e. the uncertainty regarding the Two-States' solution) and domestic developments (e.g. political reforms, social welfare, ethno-social cleavages etc.). These have influenced Israel's "state of mind", a concept, as vague as it may initially seem, that is far from being novel in either daily or psychological discourse; yet relatively unexplored in political studies. It has been mostly used in constructivist theory as a disposition, produced by opinion\preference formation and socialization; a result of skill developing and political learning, which consists of sensitivity, concern enabling the perception\rating of issues and the targeted identification of problems. In my reading, a "state of mind" is a corpus, a substructure of intangible, but nonetheless indispensable, mental pictures through which reality is perceived and constructed<sup>1</sup>. As such, similar to the concept of identity<sup>2</sup>, the former features an emphasis on ideas, culture and values. Thus it is useful in tracing both patterns of causality over a period of time and in changing social circumstances, as well as conceptualizing individual self-definition alongside socially related cognitive endeavors<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> See Charles E. Lindblom, "Another State of Mind", *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 76, no. 1, 1982, pp. 9-21; John E. Rielly, "America's State of Mind", *Foreign Policy*, vol. 66, 1987, pp. 39-56; Roger Morgan, "A European 'Society of States' – but only States of Mind?", *International Affairs*, vol. 76, no. 3, 2000, pp. 559-574.

<sup>2</sup> Since the definitional plurality of 'identity' is oceanic, we approach the concept as an interactive and dynamic product originated by the formulation and recognition (both individually and collectively) of a shared sense of belonging. See A. Touraine, "An Introduction to the Study of Social Movements", *Social Research*, vol. 52, no. 4, "Social Movements", Winter 1985, pp. 749-787; A. Melucci, "Nomads of the Present – Social Movements and Individual Needs", in John Keane, Paul Mier (eds.), *Contemporary Society*, Temple University, Philadelphia, 1989, pp. 180-232; Cristina Flesher Fominaya, "Collective Identity in Social Movements: Central Concepts and Debates", *Sociology Compass*, vol. 4, no.6, 2010, pp. 393-404.

<sup>3</sup> See E. Gellner, *Culture, Identity, and Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, New York, 1987.

Based on the above, the main research question is: How the concept of “*state of mind*” can be used with regard to Israeli politics? Beyond the synthetic theoretical delimitations mentioned above, this paper assumes that it is possible to refer to the concept of “state of mind” as a container delineating the erosion of some traditional issues (e.g. security and peace, secular-religious *status quo*) and the revival of others (e.g. social equity, ethnic cleavages) in the arena of the most recent legislative Israeli elections. Furthermore, in this reading, the concept reflects, to some extent, the identity of the main political actors, whether individually or collectively. Whereas a “state of mind” presents transient features (in terms of either emotions or content), an “identity” comprises more solid and structured elements (cultural traditions and normative practices) which are more easily recognizable at a social level<sup>4</sup>. However, while the latter is tangible with difficulty beyond the observable actions deriving from it, the former is more easily contextualized in time and space; a sort of segment of the larger institutionalized and politicised national identity<sup>5</sup>. Before proceeding with the argument, a *caveat* is necessary. Dealing with *Israeli politics* through the lenses of *identity* and *state of mind* is an oceanic field of interrogation. It is hence necessary to limit the focus on three main aspects: 1) *political discourse and legitimacy*; 2) the perception of Israel’s *national and social security*; 3) *antagonistic leadership*. Their choice is far from being arbitrary; the three aspects have become key-elements in Israeli politics since the country gained independence in 1948. Moreover, as Israeli democracy has been continuously challenged by both foreign and domestic difficulties (e.g. war, social unrest, ideological polarization), these three aspects need to be collocated within a bigger picture: Israeli politics. Such a deductive step is particularly useful considering the intricate Israeli sociopolitical history as well as of the wide range of politics itself. Elections may also serve as a magnifying glass of what and how citizenry perceives and articulates democratic politics; much beyond the more traditional definition of the former as an aggregation of interests entailed by democratic representation<sup>6</sup>. In a constructivist frame of interpretation, it is hence possible to describe elections as institutions that aim both to validate and negotiate the existent power relations between the governing and the governed. Consequence of a simple syllogism, it is possible to assert that if Israel is a democracy and if elections are essential moments in a democratic setting, then the political institutions of popular vote and the (s)election of a legitimated ruling-class are highly relevant issue that require focused investigations.

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<sup>4</sup> The complexity of “state of mind” is similar to that of “populism”. See M. Tarchi, *L’Italia populista: Dal qualunquismo a Beppe Grillo*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> See R. Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: New York [etc.], 1996.

<sup>6</sup> We refer to the traditional and procedural interpretation: “[A]n election is a device for filling public offices by reference to popular preferences”, see A. Heywood, *Political Theory: An Introduction*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2004, p. 235.

The main contribution of the proposed analysis is to specify the key-elements in Israel's political discourse (i.e. leadership, security and legitimacy) as a part of multi-factorial trends such as the ongoing fragmentation and sectorialization of political offer, the increasingly clashes in political antagonism, the conflict within Israeli citizenry and the sociopolitical cleavages it eternalizes. By using the venue of legislative elections, as a moment to observe and deconstruct the Israeli "state of mind", not only can we delineate and contextualize current dynamics in Israeli political culture but we can also trace the evolving structural features of Israeli democracy (e.g. key-actors, decision-making, ideological content).

### *Case Selection and Theoretical Expectations*

Israeli politics is not new to political analysts. Neither is Israeli politics. Many papers and books have been written about the history and variations of Zionism and its leaders as a core-element of Israeli party-politics and their role in shaping Israeli national identity<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore, literature has been generous and enlightening in examining the geopolitical conflict with the Arab world and Israeli policies without omitting the increasing more relevant heuristic salience of leadership. Neither there exist a lack of scientific reviews concerning the divergent politico-cultural profiles of Ashkenazi and Sephardi Israelis (the so-called "ethnic cleavage") nor scholarly production about Israel's ethnic and religious minorities<sup>8</sup>. In addition, wider political phenomena such as the rise of radical right parties and the issues of coalition-building in Israel have not been neglected<sup>9</sup>. Thus, various topics as statehood, nation-building, ideology etc.

<sup>7</sup> See Y. Shavit, *Jabotinsky and the Revisionist Movement, 1925-1948*, Frank Cass & Co. LTD, Abingdon (Oxon, UK), New York (USA), 1988; Z. Sterhell, *The Founding Myths of Israel: Nationalism, Socialism, and the Making of the Jewish State*, transl. by D. Maisel, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1998; A. Shapira, *Essential Papers on Zionism*, ed. with Jehuda Reinharz, New York University Press, New York, 1996, as well as *Idem*, *Ben-Gurion: Father of Modern Israel*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2014; D. Gordis, *Menachem Begin and the Battle for Israel's Soul*, Schoken Books/Nextbook Press, New York, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> See Baruch Kimmerling, *The Invention and Decline of Israeliness: State, Society, and the Military*, University of California Press, Berkley, Los-Angeles and London, 2001; Yehuda Goodman, Joseph Loss, "The Other as Brother: Nation-Building and Ethnic Ambivalence in Early Jewish-Israeli Anthropology", *Anthropological Quarterly*, vol. 82, no. 2, Spring, 2009, pp. 477-508; Avi Bareli, "Mapai and the Oriental Jewish Question in the Early Years of the State", *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society*, n.s. 16, no. 1, Fall 2009, pp. 54-84; As'ad Ghanem, *Ethnic Politics in Israel: The Margins and the Ashkenazi Center*, Routledge, Abingdon, New York, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> See E. Sprinzak, "The Emergence of the Israeli Radical Right", *Comparative Politics*, vol. 21, no. 2, 1989, pp. 171-192; followed by his book *The Ascendance of Israel's Radical Right*, Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1991; D. Filc, U. Lebel, "The Post-Oslo Israeli Populist Radical Right in Comparative Perspective: Leadership,

have been thoroughly analysed, while providing evidence that Israel, despite geopolitical and cultural specificities, can be studied by using more general, Western, political concepts. Yet, when it comes to parliamentary elections, relatively little has been examined beyond the descriptive and punctual overview of the results<sup>10</sup> notwithstanding the use of different approaches<sup>11</sup>. That is not to say that media coverage suffices or completes what may or may not be traced from an electoral event. It does not mean that studying Israel's electoral trends does not deserve attention. However, it means there is a void to fill in by complementary analysis of elections as a moment in which Israel's "state of mind" reveals its shades rather than being the direct reflection of the former and automatically dichotomized between Israeli Right and Left. As a result, the paper wishes to delineate the constellation of political factors through an identity-based analysis rather than to focus on the results of the democratic practice. As identity is multifaceted, the paper's point of departure draws on recent lessons concerning populistic elements and its place in western democracies (i.e. leadership, charisma, the people\|not-people dichotomy) and the connected political communication subject-matters (issue-setting). It seeks to offer a new way of looking at elections, not as a simple outcome of political maneuvering but as one which embodies deeper and longer dynamics regarding national identity and what politicians make of it. In other words, elections may provide us the opportunity to detect the intensification of political antagonism in search of visibility and consensus, the capitalization of existent cleavages in Israeli society, as well as the re-adaptation of issues. But before we examine those political factors point by point, we must recapitulate the event itself.

### *Engraving Politics in 2015 Israel*

The Israeli electoral system is based on proportional representation as formulated by the Hagenbach-Bischoff model. The whole national territory serves as a single electoral constituency in which 120 Knesset-members are elected

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Voter Characteristics and Political Discourse", *Mediterranean Politics*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2005, pp. 85-97.

<sup>10</sup> We mainly refer to the sector of electoral studies *tout court* as offered by Israeli scholars. See Abraham Diskin, Reuven Y. Hazan, "The Parliamentary Election in Israel, January 2013", in *Notes on Recent Elections*, "Electoral Studies", vol. 34, 2014, pp. 291-379

<sup>11</sup> It is noteworthy to mention the socio-spatial approach offered by two Israeli geographers who have studied political partisanship as reflected from the electoral results. See I. Charney, D. Malkinson, "Between Electoral and Urban Geography: Voting Patterns and Socio-Spatial Dynamics in Tel-Aviv", *Applied Geography*, vol. 58, 2015, pp. 1-6; as well as the more historical\sociological approach of Alexander Bligh in studying vote patterns in the Israeli Arab population. See A. Bligh, "Political Trends in the Israeli Arab Population and its Vote in Parliamentary Elections", *Israel Affairs*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2013, pp. 201-219.

(based on a closed-list system). Since Israeli democracy represents a wide and fragmented factions composing Israeli citizenry, – Jewish and non-Jewish, lay and religious along the entire dichotomous spectrum of Left and Right –, the party system consists of a plurality of political parties addressing issues from different ideological worldviews. Consequently, the Israeli multi-party system<sup>12</sup> results in political alliances between different political actors, which favours the formation of political blocs and thus determines political offer.

The table below summarizes the essential figures included in our analysis. It emphasizes Israeli parties and the centrality of their leaders as well as the fragmentation of the Israeli political offer<sup>13</sup> while assessing the continuity/discontinuity with the previous electoral round. The total Israeli suffrage comprised 5,881,696 voters from which only 4,254,738 individuals went to the ballot. 4,210,884 votes were qualified as legally valid (thus: 43,854 disqualified or 1.03%). The voter turnout reached 72.34% (against 67.8% in the 2013 legislative elections); the highest rate since 1999 (78.7%). The legal threshold was 3.25% (or the number of 136,854 valid votes).

Table 1

Elections for the 20th Knesset 17 March 2015

Parties elected to Knesset	Party Leader	% Votes	No. Seats	Trend Compared to 2013 Legislative Elections
Likud	Benjamin Netanyahu	23.40%	30	+12
Zionist Union	Isaac Herzog (Labour Party) Tzipi Livini (Hatnuah)	18.67%	24	+3
Joint List	Ayman Odeh	10.54%	13	+2
Yesh Atid	Yair Lapid	8.81%	11	-8
Kulanu	Moshe Kahlon	7.49%	10	New
The Jewish Home	Naftali Bennett	6.74%	8	-4
Shas	Aryeh Deri	5.73%	7	-4
Yisrael Beiteinu	Avigor Lieberman	5.11%	6	-7
United Torah Judaism	Yaakov Litzman	5.03%	6	-1
Meretz	Zehava Gal-On	3.93%	5	-1

Source: Israeli Central Elections Committee 2015.

<sup>12</sup> In the 2013 legislative elections 120 members of Knesset (MKs) were elected from 12 parties, whereas in the 2015 elected Knesset 10 parties are represented. On the so-called “sectorial parties” and current political alliances, see below.

<sup>13</sup> The table only comprises the winning parties of the 2015 legislative elections. However it is important to mention that other 15 electoral lists had registered at the Israeli Central Elections Committee 2015 prior to the campaign. These lists gained approx. 190,000 votes (circa 4.5% of the total amount) and did not surpass the legal threshold.

*The Institutional Context of the 2015 Elections:  
Reasons and Main Actors*

On 8 December 2014, the 19<sup>th</sup> Knesset passed a bill to dissolve itself and hold elections on 17 January 2015, after the tumultuous ending of Prime Minister Netanyahu third government. This vote followed increasing difficulties in compacting coalition lines over ideology and policy-making<sup>14</sup>. One of the issues concerned a significant structural element in the Israeli political system: the electoral threshold. Its change in March 2014 (from 2% to 3.25%) has been a matter of both legal and political disputes. The latter was mainly endorsed by Minister of Foreign Affairs Avigdor Lieberman and his party “Israel Our Home” (*Yisrael Beiteinu*), implying that reduced number of (small) parties secures better governability and encourages effective political mergers<sup>15</sup>. However, alternative explanations for the amendment may be found. In addition to the assumption that lasting governments are unlikely in a highly fragmented political party-system, the “Governance Bill” aimed at shrinking the political weight of Netanyahu’s (at the time) opponents from the two poles of Israel’s political spectrum. In other words, it targeted for a less multipolar representation in the Israeli Parliament starting from the so-called “sectorial parties”: the Arab parties<sup>16</sup> and the ultra-Orthodox ones (*vis-à-vis* the so-called “consensual” ones). While the first are “uncomfortably” anti-Zionist, the second have been controversial in demanding considerable parts of the government budget to be destined to their own communities. It is unnecessary to mention that the two different political groups heavily criticized the “undemocratic” move. The Knesset voting took place on 11 March 2014 with 67 votes in favour of the new Electoral Law (endorsed by the entire governing coalition), while the opposition jointly boycotted it<sup>17</sup>. But the “straw that broke the camel’s back” was no other than the controversial *Basic Law proposal: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People*; firstly submitted by Knesset Members Avi Dichter

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<sup>14</sup> We refer to the wave of resignations within the 33<sup>th</sup> Israeli government starting from Minister of Internal Affairs Gideon Sa’ar (Likud) on 4 November 2014 and ending with the dismissals from office of Justice Minister Tzipi Livni and Finance Minister Yair Lapid on 2 December 2014. All these affected the power-balance of several Israeli parties.

<sup>15</sup> The dynamics of the “Governance Bill” are journalistically summarized in the following articles: <http://www.timesofisrael.com/governance-bill-is-a-game-changer-for-israeli-politics/> (English), (last accessed 11 July 2017); <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politi/1.2083301> (Hebrew), (last accessed 11 July 2017); <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politi/1.2086308> (Hebrew), (last accessed 11 July 2017).

<sup>16</sup> A. Bligh, “Political Trends in the Israeli Arab Population...cit”. Also see footnote no. 11

<sup>17</sup> The amendment (n. 62 of the Israeli Electoral Law) was officially published on 19.3.2014.

(Kadima)<sup>18</sup> and Ze'ev Elkin (Likud) in August 2011 and unsuccessfully archived at the time. However, a similar draft law was reformulated in March 2013 after the issue became a part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Knesset negotiations, between the Likud-Yisrael Beitenu and The Jewish Home to form a new government headed by Benjamin Netanyahu. Several complementary proposals followed. The so-called "Nation-State Law" bill defines several identity-building\conservation principles for contemporary Israel to follow. On the one hand, it reads that the State of Israel must be *legally identified* as the "nation state of the Jewish people", and anchored to the ancient Jewish Torah Laws (mentioned as the "source of inspiration" for Israeli Civic Law, and so on, and so forth). Moreover, it establishes the *Hebrew language as the sole official language* in Israel, in contrast to the existing legal *status quo* (that has existed in Israel ever since its birth), which considered both Hebrew and Arabic to be official languages on an equal footing. Hence, it denotes Israeliness and Jewishness as one inseparable cultural stratum. On the other hand, the law proposal *prescriptively* privileges the acquisition of Israeli citizenship by every Jew living in Diaspora (paragraph 5). Thus, it further formalizes the State's commitment to Jewish settlement. This point would not result so draconian, if it did not juxtapose the precarious legal status of non-Jews in today's Israel. Many Arabs, whose forefathers have been living within the State's geographical borders from days immemorial, have witnessed legal means being used to restrict their right to acquire private lands in Jewish communities. The move itself added oil to the political fire and shook the ground under Jewish and Arab feet.

Furthermore, this ideological U-turn from liberal discourse by the rightist coalition silenced what many considered to be the progressist peace-seeking legacy of the Oslo Accords. Although the bill did not pass and reflects only partially the broader sections of Israeli Jewish society, the mere necessity to theorize and adopt such basic-law implies far-reaching consequences. Not only has the deterioration of Jewish-Arab relations emphasized the almost insoluble tension regarding Arab citizens' solidarity with their Palestinian kin in the Occupied Territories and throughout the Arab World (wars considered), but it has now reached the "self-fulfilling prophecy" about the presumed disloyalty of Israeli Arabs. This potential time-bomb, according to the rightist discourse, reached its climax when instead of the elder generation of Israeli Arabs, – rather politically submissive and traditionally divided in four different political parties (Balad, Hadash, Ta'al and the United Arab List) –, a *younger generation* stood up for its *rights*, jointly struggling for equality with self-consciousness and

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<sup>18</sup> In August 2012 Avi Dichter announced his resignation from the Knesset. He later joined the ranks of the Likud but failed to be elected for the party's list for the 19<sup>th</sup> Knesset; however, the endeavour was accomplished in the Likud's list for the 20<sup>th</sup> Knesset.



political shrewdness<sup>19</sup>. This is how the prevalently Arab Joint List came into being<sup>20</sup>.

But what kind of discourse do we talk about, beyond the confrontation of conflicting political stances? Our scope conditions delineate the important role played by identity politics in Israel with regard to the country's self-image as a Jewish state (*vis-à-vis* the Arab population) and its use in choosing criteria of governability as well as being omnipresent in the political playground of legislation and parties' alliances. That is to say that Israeli politics, thus elections, are both characterized by discourse continuity taking advantage of the difficulty to define and interpret national identity in contemporary Israel. Nonetheless, this hypothesis does not exclude divergent modes to gain political consensus, as the prioritisation of issues not only shifts according to general social and cultural phenomena but affects politicians' own offer *vis-à-vis* the electorate.

The next paragraph aims to provide some general notions regarding *legality and legitimacy* as structured in Israeli politics. The two elements together with the issues of *security* and *leadership* (discussed below) take on new forms through time and socio-political change. Therefore, they can be used as four analytical variables representing contextual circumstances within Israeli politics while drawing the outlines of the country's "state of mind".

But what did precede the legislative elections in Israel 2015? What political calculations and maneuvering brought about the premature return to the ballot-box after the dissolution of the 2013-elected Knesset? The following paragraphs supply an overview of the political dynamics which provided the causes of the 2015 electoral event.

### *The Three Dimensions of the Israeli "State of Mind" throughout the 2015 Elections*

#### *Discourse and Legitimacy*

The electoral campaign for the 20<sup>th</sup> Knesset presented some noteworthy challenges to Israeli political discourse. It came after a short-lived government

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<sup>19</sup> See once again Baruch Kimmerling, *The Invention and Decline of Israeliness...*cit.

<sup>20</sup> The birth of the Joint List was widely reported by both Israeli and foreign media. See Ruth Eglash, "Israel's Arab Political Parties Have United for the First Time", *The Washington Post*, 10 March 2015 (retrieved 22 September 2015); Hassan Shaalan, "Arab Parties to Run as One List in Upcoming Elections", *Ynet News*, 22 January 2015 (retrieved 22 September 2015); Elhanan Miller, "After Uniting Arabs Behind Him, Ayman Odeh Looks to Lead Opposition", 4 March 2015, *The Times of Israel* (English): <http://www.timesofisrael.com/after-uniting-arabs-behind-him-ayman-odeh-looks-to-lead-opposition>, (last accessed 11 July 2017).

that ran the 2014 summer Israel-Gaza conflict (also known as Operation Protective Edge) and should have given practical responses to the unresolved domestic issues of the 2011 Israeli social justice protests. While national security *vis-à-vis* welfare-related security will be discussed shortly, this paragraph aims at tracking down what some experts refer to as *legalistic discourse* in nowadays Israel:

“[...] the *language and practices*-about state law has been in some decline in Israeli society and it might be the case in other countries as well, since it has *failed to provide path breaking social reforms*”<sup>21</sup>

The latter has traditionally played an important part in Israeli society and a useful tool for understanding the “*Israeli People’s Army Model*”, pursuing to implement the Jewish “*melting pot*” policy. The combination of civil duty and legalistic discourse continue to legitimize:

“massive state interference in social and political life during security crises. *Inter alia*, the political establishment imposes compulsory recruitment of people and economic resources, controls information, and curtails individual freedoms of expression, association, and demonstration. The state promotes the emergence of exacting sociopolitical and legal norms and endorses severe sanctions against the opponents of war”<sup>22</sup>

But no comparable institutionalized “*civilian welfare*” has yet stood against this hard-power “*civilian militarism*”<sup>23</sup> maintaining the Israeli “*liberal ethnocracy*”<sup>24</sup> Social issues were not forged into such a frame. According to Kimmerling (2001), that’s what keeps marginalising and counterbalancing (previously existing) values of pluralism, while forming a routinized “*military-cultural complex*”<sup>25</sup>. Therefore, and only to a marginal extent, the 2011 wave of social protests<sup>26</sup> had induced social-led legalistic discourse to Israeli politics.

<sup>21</sup> See Shulamit Almog, Gad Barzilai, *Social Protest and the Absence of Legalistic Discourse: In the Quest for New Language of Dissent*, Springer Science+Business Media, Dordrecht, 2014: author’s personal copy (italics are mine).

<sup>22</sup> Gad Barzilai, “War, Democracy, and Internal Conflict: Israel in a Comparative Perspective”, *Comparative Politics*, vol. 31, no. 3, Apr. 1999, pp. 317-336 (citation taken from p. 318).

<sup>23</sup> Baruch Kimmerling, *The Invention and Decline of Israeliness: State, Culture and Military in Israel*, University of California Press, Los Angeles and Berkeley, 2001, pp. 208-209.

<sup>24</sup> Shlomo Sand, *The Invention of the Jewish People*, Verso, London, New York, 2009, p. 307.

<sup>25</sup> Baruch Kimmerling, *The Invention and Decline of Israeliness...cit.*, pp. 208-228.

<sup>26</sup> By “wave of social protests” we mean the series of demonstrations against the continuing rise of living costs in Israel. The first protest (June 2011) concerned food prices starting from a Facebook-led Israeli consumer boycott of cottage cheese (which is perceived as a basic national food commodity). The “Cottage Cheese Boycott” preceded more general protests (14 July 2011-29 October 2011) regarding the housing crisis and the increasing

However, an attempt to revive such a discourse did take form in the last electoral campaign. Disillusionment, skepticism and democratic malaise towards the state and self-absorbed politicians are only some of the buzzwords used to define common sentiments of restless citizenry. The cries and shouts of the weak and forgotten are evolving into an overwhelming social phenomenon. The explosion of complex anti-politics rhetoric often labelled as demagoguery and/or (neo)populism<sup>27</sup>, has paved the way for new poetic system channeling people's boiling discontent into unapologetic tones. Of course, this has important implications for democracy-stakeholders (voters and representatives alike) as political trajectories make rethink political agendas and dynamically influence specific policies<sup>28</sup>. By filtering old and new interests in politics' own recursive process, political figures corral and orchestrate the public in times of uncertainty and distrust. Such tendencies are observed in many western democracies, where decreasing economic growth and increasing political instability have been mostly felt. According to contemporary theories regarding populism, the loud critique coming from the people is no other than a sophisticated "populist antiestablishment strategy" promoted by mostly radical-right parties that "present themselves as the real champions of true democracy – as a new kind of party – which takes the worries and interests of the common man into account"<sup>29</sup>. Thus antisystem discourse, including anti-elite echoes, is not unknown to mature democracies. And Israel is no different. Once the main claims of the last social protest were institutionalized and transformed into technocratic committees<sup>30</sup> of experts and into administrative legal jargon, it seemed the political fervour had less public fortune, though not insignificant. We find suitable to mention the cases of Stav Shaffir and Itzik Shmuli: two leading protesters who had been actively involved in the social causes prior to the protests, came into the arena of party-politics by joining the ranks of the Labour Party in 2012, and were eventually elected to the Knesset in 2013. Despite the social buzz surrounding the two (chiefly due to their young age), their post-manifestation experiences only demonstrate the prevalence of

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poverty rates. The latter are known by several names: "Social Justice Protest", "Cost of Living Protest", "Tents Protest", or simply the "Middle Class Protest".

<sup>27</sup> See N. Bobbio, N. Matteucci, G. Pasquino (ed. by), *Dizionario di Politica*, UTET, Torino, 2004.

<sup>28</sup> For a case of politically neo-populist maneuvering, see Michael C. Campbell, "Are All Politics Local? A Case Study of Local Conditions in a Period of 'Law and Order' Politics", *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 664, no. 1, 2016, pp. 43-61.

<sup>29</sup> See J. Rydgren, "The Sociology of the Radical Right", *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 33, 2007, pp. 241-262 (citation taken from p. 246).

<sup>30</sup> The major Social-Economic Change Committee, also known as the Trajtenberg Committee, gave birth to the political candidacy of the person heading it; Prof. Manual Trajtenberg who was elected as the 11<sup>th</sup> Knesset Member of the Zionist Union.

traditional political participation in the Israeli context. But still, and although the vocally disconcerting rallies of protesters gradually faded out, many social justice promises remained on paper alone. Hence, the momentum for social sensibility did not diminish, especially as a result of Netanyahu's market-oriented economic policies. Nevertheless, no external (a)political leading figure had been found till an ex-political actor came forth and proposed himself as the voice of the Israeli low-middle class. The buds of the Israeli 2011 social protest unfolded in the somewhat grey figure of Moshe Kahlon<sup>31</sup> who waved the flag of social equality and anti-capitalism against the "fat and greedy" tycoons (supported by the financial establishment) on top of all ideological disagreements. Kahlon's discourse offered something roughly similar to the traditional legalistic, rarely sensational, discourse regarding the certainty of law and norms and the imperative to adopt solidarity-based welfare policies. By avoiding harsh rhetorical statements as well as the traditional Right-Left dichotomy throughout the electoral campaign, but with "freestyled" slogans emphasising his real "Likudnik" profile towards the end of it, Moshe Kahlon and his party Kulanu (lit. "All of Us") earned 10 seats in the Knesset (the fifth-largest party), after obtaining 315,202 votes, or 7.49% of the total votes cast. Thus, Kahlon became a decisive figure, able to tip the balance of power in forming Netanyahu's new Centre-Right coalition<sup>32</sup>.

But did Moshe Kahlon's political endeavour break the walls of national security-based discourse in Israeli politics? Since the issue of national security defines much of Israel's identity, the conceptual "map" it sets up transforms and shifts the political "barometer". The next paragraph deals with the two ways the term "security" was interpreted and used in the last legislative elections.

### *The Two Faces of Security*

Electoral success in Israel has always been determined by an inevitable buzzword: security. This thorny theme defines what may be considered as "day-to-day problems" as well as how and to what extent other issues must be tackled in relation to it. Israeli leaders have the duty to make their best to guarantee national security. Yet this magic word has shown a progressively different meaning in the last electoral campaign. Political discourse had seemed to have overcome the traditional issue of peace-war\national security regarding the

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<sup>31</sup> Kahlon is a former member of the Likud, former Minister of Communications (2009-2013) as well as Minister of Welfare and Social Services (2011-2013). Two years after he had taken a break from politics in 2012, Moshe Kahlon founded a new political party, the *Kulanu* party (We All Together) which won 10 seats in the Knesset.

<sup>32</sup> He has overtly demanded the Finance Ministry and other social-related portfolios for other party-members.

Arab-Israeli conflict (i.e. the dichotomous metaphor of hawks vs. doves) in terms of both ideological divider and popular consensus-builder. Following the abovementioned, Israeli parties' positions mainly invested in the security issue identifying it with domestic affairs, namely the state of social welfare (especially housing), taxation and current economic unease. Hence, the hawks and doves lost their supremacy to the seemingly binding legalistic discourse of good government as a provider of equal social opportunities. However, the softer, domestic, yet instrumental, rhetoric of "social security" eventually died out.

On Election Day, 17 March 2015, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned, on a broadcasted video on a Facebook page-event, that Israeli Arabs were heading to the polls "in droves"<sup>33</sup>. This pivotal moment in Netanyahu's personal campaign of "fear and racism"<sup>34</sup> ended with what spin-doctors, PR, journalists and other communication professionals named "Bibi's Three-Day War", "Bibi's Blitz" or Netanyahu's "Three-Day Push"<sup>35</sup>. Not only was the latter a desperate politically incorrect cry for help, considering the risky position of the Likud according to the pre-polls, it revived the "We vs. Them" dichotomy against the Israeli Left (a legitimate opponent to outdo), but most of all, it manifested the successful rising of racist demagoguery which penetrated the Israeli "state of mind" against the 20% Arab minority living as equal-right Israeli citizens. The dashing equalitarian welfare rhetoric suddenly fell from grace and allowed the 30-seat victory of the Likud in the elections, not to mention the personal triumph of Netanyahu himself over the "monopolistically unrepresentative leftist media"<sup>36</sup>. Furthermore, the anti-Arab statement quickly became an international scandal, when US President Barack Obama, during an interview to the American Huffington Post given on March 21<sup>st</sup>, addressed the matter by saying: "We indicated that that kind of rhetoric was contrary to what

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<sup>33</sup> The announcement also stated that the Israeli radical Left was sponsored by foreign governments (i.e. Iran) attempting to put an end to Likud rule and repeated the allegations against the V15 (Victory 2015) campaign (financed by the international grassroots movement OneVoice). The Facebook video (in Hebrew) is available on <https://www.facebook.com/268108602075/posts/10152778935532076> (last accessed 19 June 2016).

<sup>34</sup> The anti-liberal statement was largely reported and criticized by journalists and intellectuals with Israeli Arab TV host and journalist Lucy Aharish (a "torch-lighter" to be at Israel's next Independence Day ceremony, themed "Israeli breakers") as the main defender of democracy-loving Israel.

<sup>35</sup> For two journalistic examples that used this kind of denomination, see the following: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/18/us-israel-election-fallout-idUSKBN0ME10120150318> (English), (last accessed 11 July 2017); <http://www.maariv.co.il/news/elections-2015/Article-468742> (Hebrew), (last accessed 11 July 2017).

<sup>36</sup> Such accusations by the Israeli Prime Minister have only increased since the open criticism directed at the director-general of the Israel's Second Authority Broadcasting Company Shai Babad in July 2014. The latter resigned few months later in order to run in the Kulanu List for the Knesset.

is the best of Israel's traditions [...]”<sup>37</sup>. A similar statement was consequently given by the deputy spokesperson for the United States Department of State Marie Harf on March 23<sup>rd</sup>. The fact that the Israeli electorate let the securitarian discourse to take over social matters and positively respond to Netanyahu's statements may teach us that the two issues occupy different spots in the Israeli political discourse (with security *vis-à-vis* the Arab threat being the highest priority), and that they are banalised as dissimilar and contrasting components of the larger “Israeli state of mind”.

Prime Minister Netanyahu formally apologized to Israeli Arabs, when he hosted an official delegation six days after the “misfortunate statement” at the Prime Minister's Residence. On the same day (March 23), Channel 10 evening edition journalist Oshrat Kotler interviewed the Joint List chairman Ayman Odeh about the reconciliation between Netanyahu and the Arab minority. The young and charismatic Arab leader rejected the apology asserting that the 90% of Israeli Arabs who voted the Joint List against Netanyahu's racist stances were not invited to the Prime Minister's Residence. Later that evening, Israeli President Reuven Rivlin, a longtime critic of Benjamin Netanyahu, announced that formal consultations on forming Israel's new government have been concluded, and appointed Netanyahu as Israel's (old-new) Prime Minister. This episode demonstrates the fragility of any attempt to rethink Israel's security in terms of social welfare. Since the Arab conflict and the perennial need to secure national borders hinder any change in Israel's budget prioritization, what had seemed to be a salient discourse in Israeli politics in favour of welfare policies did not outdo the vicious circle of “hard power” security discourse, cynically adopted in the name of political conservation. The question regarding who are the political actors taking charge of Israel's national interests, and the qualities they possess to govern Israeli citizens are the core-issues that are discussed in the next paragraph.

### *Antagonistic Political Actors*

Personal charisma is the name of the game in Israeli contemporary politics. Seldom do parties succeed in gaining wide popular support without its leading figure continuously building up and affirming his (rarely hers) charismatic leadership. The personalization of politics puts the right face and the right rhetoric for it to express the people's common sense. It transcends the technicalities of procedural democracy and parliamentary representation, and it

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<sup>37</sup> A full transcript of the interview is available on [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/21/obama-huffpost-interview-transcript\\_n\\_6905450.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/21/obama-huffpost-interview-transcript_n_6905450.html) (last accessed 19 June 2016).

configures voters in the vivid image of self-determinant rational citizenry. But charismatic stances also bestow responsibility upon the leader's own shoulders in terms of personalized trust (rather than in terms of institutional accountability). Hence, the leader's primary role is to serve as a spokesperson to the masses, silent or noisy majority whatsoever, for him\her to enjoy voters' trust. This imperative is slightly different from the more "traditionally" functional norm-based definition of a "statesman", whose major duty is to manage and supervise the execution and performative conduct of the state apparatus, while serving the national interest at best<sup>38</sup>. In order to (re)gain that trust (which is more or less what democracy is truly about), the leader puts voice in the mouths of the unprivileged, a "genuine" gesture through which the simple majority finds its true way. Though most politicians, nowadays, have become charisma-seeking individuals, there exist only fewer and fewer examples of political actors who have stood out and played their "theatrical" part of popular heroes, ready to transform words into actions<sup>39</sup>. Moreover, the role of "man of action" indulges people's enthusiasm with instant solutions for their day-to-day problems. The moral register stirs up popular admiration *vis-à-vis* the upsurge of scandals and misdeeds committed within politics, sometimes by the same politicians to whom the latter are attributed. The last Israeli election, held on March 17, is a formidable case to demonstrate these assertions.

Incumbent Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has won the electoral round against all odds, or against what had seemed to be the case<sup>40</sup>, – as the results should have been better hypothesized by experts who embarrassingly did not base the opinion polls on most Israelis' positive judgement about Netanyahu's suitability to govern (43% vs. 35% of his opponent Isaac "Bougie" Herzog). The two candidates did not step out of the charisma-building campaign, but embraced it and adopted similar political strategies. Despite the abyss concerning the starting point of the two, both ideologically and personally, their electoral "squabble" represented no novelty to Israeli politics. Ideology was seldom discussed and confronted, since it had been practically

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<sup>38</sup> The "ideal-type" distinction between a "political leader" and a "statesperson" is debatable. These categorial limits get somewhat blurred by history and nostalgia because many past public (political) figures are viewed today as the "*Generation of Nephilim*" (e.g. David Ben-Gurion, Chaim Weizmann, Ze'ev Jabotinsky, Menachem Begin, Yitzhak Rabin etc.).

<sup>39</sup> Here comes to mind the thriving and vast literature on Max Weber's "Politics as Profession". Furthermore, the critical aspect of democratic politics as the rule of law and functional administration reemerges.

<sup>40</sup> The last opinion polls published four days before the Election Day outlined a four-seat advantage to the centre-left political alliance the *Zionist Union* (Hebrew: HaMahane HaZioni): 24 vs. 20 seats going to the Likud. The data is taken from an opinion poll published by Channel 10 (March 13<sup>th</sup> 2015; the poll consisted of 1203 adults (including 258 Israeli Arabs).

blurred by the usual banalisation of domestic issues (mainly welfare) and security imperatives (Iran). The same old litany about why the governing candidate would be much worse than his opponent did not bring on a political shift. Furthermore, key-words such as “true leadership”, “responsibility”, “accountability” (the candidates’ personal virtues), “national pride” and “security” (goals to be achieved) were much to be expected as in each and every campaign. However, the narratives that contain them vary according to the “zeitgeist” of the moment. Thus the last Israeli elections give us the opportunity to identify *personal charisma* as one of the current ingredients contributing to the formation of the Israeli “state of mind”.

The two candidates were much identified by their personal biographies. This is not uncommon in politics but here the match was to the nth degree. Both politicians hold “by-the-book” pedigrees. The histories of these two prominent Zionist lineages were engaged in the electoral campaign attesting that public service is inseparable from both the Netanyahu and the Herzog families. Likud campaign videos did not hesitate to remind voters that Benjamin Netanyahu grew up in a Zionist home, followed his older brother’s footsteps in the IDF, and served as Israeli ambassador to the UN (1984-1988)<sup>41</sup>. A parallel biographical excursus was also offered by Isaac Herzog in campaign of the Zionist Union. Therefore Jewish tradition, active Zionism, rich military experience and diplomatic skills were to determine the candidate’s suitability to govern, as if such qualities passed down from generation to generation. Giving these biographical pedigrees, the two contenders could not escape the personalization of the position they were so eager to occupy. Their antagonism was chiefly marked by mutual accusations of recklessness and ineptitude *vis-à-vis* social and economic reforms and the precarious geopolitical situation. Although a thorough comparison between Netanyahu’s and Herzog’s biographies would be a legitimate way to assess their political aptitude, what really interested/influenced the Israeli electorate was a bit different. That is to say the elections had a less “gossip-centered” nuance to them.

Fear of change and progress makes the magic notion of the *people* an extraordinary tool (as well as a project) in the hands of two political ideas: one is based on rational norms of democratic citizenship, the other on sentimental

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<sup>41</sup> As the electoral campaign was warming up Netanyahu’s decision to address the US Congress on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2015 and declare opposition to the “Iranian Nuclear Deal” became a new example for his statesman-qualities. Some American politicians and media personalities (identified with the Republican Party, e.g.: Speaker of the United States House of Representatives John Boehner; House Representative Jason Chaffetz; TV and radio broadcaster Rush Limbaugh) compared Netanyahu’s speech to the one delivered by British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, who “similarly” opposed the Munich Agreement (1938). The comparison was mainly based on the fact the two political figures were the only foreign leaders to address the US Congress in three different occasions. The analogy provoked open debates, both in the USA and Israel.



kinship. What may be called “populism”, or the project of the *people*, is based upon the dialectics of integration and separation of the entire community of the *heartland*<sup>42</sup>. The union of these two evocative concepts (“people”+ “heartland”) places the first to be “the occupants” of the second; an orderly and harmonious “territory of the imagination”<sup>43</sup>. *versus* external others. Hence, this *reciprocal exclusion of the concepts identity and alterity*<sup>44</sup> manifests negative terms of conduct and dangerous political behaviour. In Israel the fragile condition of the evidently ethnicity/culture-based socio-political fabric makes it easier for populist stances to strengthen their hold, and democracy an easy prey. Contemporaneously with legalistically-bound discourse and personal charisma, political preference in Israel also re-emerges in terms of “sectorial voting”. As such it is based on the cleavages of ethnicity (embedded in both culture and politics), especially since social cohesion and economic welfare seem to be at stake. In addition, the explosiveness of Israeli hyper-litigiousness, – even reflected in the humorous popular saying: “two Jews, three opinions” –, showed its features in the last electoral campaign, mainly through sociological categories (i.e. Ashkenazi\Sephardic, religious\lay, centre\periphery, Left\Right, Jews\non-Jews). That is to say that the antagonistic ethnic variation within the “Israeli people”, and where charisma surely plays a significant part –, determines many aspects of the country’s political “state of mind”.

A “sectorial” (heavily personalized) antagonism was evident in the turbulent struggle for votes between Shas and Yachad (lit. “Together”). Shas, led by Aryeh Mahlouf Deri (chairman of Shas throughout the 1990s, former Minister of the Interior, convicted of bribery in 2000), had to face its former chairman for almost 14 years, Eli Yishai, founder of Yachad. Yishai (once aide to Deri himself) left Shas after the clash of egos, following the death of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef in 2013. Since the tutelage and legacy of the late Rabbi, Shas’s spiritual leader, had generated disputes and intrigues between the two politicians, both convinced to be the former’s favourite and thus his legitimate political heir, a crack within the Sephardic ultraorthodox electorate was inevitable. Deri succeeded in “saving” the party from failure<sup>45</sup> as he had used a catchy buzzword to accompany his “Mizrahi vote for Mizrahi!” campaign: “invisible”. Whereas Moshe Kahlon addressed (somewhat indirectly) to lay Sephardi Israelis, belonging to the middle-class, and Eli Yishai centred his (failing) campaign on the struggle against those “who put at risk the Jewishness

<sup>42</sup> The locution “heartland people” is adopted from Paul Taggart, *Populism*, Open University Press, Buckingham, 2000.

<sup>43</sup> See Paul Taggart, *Populism*, cit., p. 95.

<sup>44</sup> Taken from F. Remotti, *L'ossessione identitaria*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2010, see p. 6 (my translation).

<sup>45</sup> Shas won 7 seats in the new Knesset; a sharp decrease in political power, if compared with the 11 MKs (members of Knesset) it had in the 19<sup>th</sup> Knesset.

of the State” (e.g. clandestine immigrants in downtown Tel-Aviv)<sup>46</sup>, Derhi approached those who hadn’t just been forgotten by the establishment, but had never achieved real social, economic or political equality within Israeli society. Thus, Shas chairman waved the flag of the “nobody people” still working for their elitist usurpers; surely represented by both the Zionist Union and Likud, but above all by Yesh Atid and its leader Yair Lapid whose father Yosef “Tommy” Lapid<sup>47</sup> was also a vocal opponent of Shas and other ultra-orthodox parties<sup>48</sup>.

A different “heartland people”<sup>49</sup> were glorified by the Jewish Home charismatic leader Naftali Bennett (Netanyahu’s Minister of Economy) who adopted an adamant slogan: “We stop apologizing, Israel’s Right”. His national-religious “people” initially seemed to resist in front of the Right-Left dichotomy. Moreover, he occupied the political void on the Right of the Likud, in crisis *vis-à-vis* Kulanu. However, Netanyahu’s alarmism soon “cannibalized” the Jewish Home extreme-Right electorate, since the Israeli Prime Minister shouted louder “rescues” and “save the Likud!” in his “three-day war”. The turning point of the loss of the Jewish Home’s political autonomy became evident at the 20,000 people national-religious Right manifestation in Tel-Aviv on March 15<sup>th</sup>, where Benjamin Netanyahu stole the show from Bennett as the central speaker. Even though the Jewish Home was unable to preserve its electoral power (it won only 8 seats in the new-elected Knesset), Naftali Bennett would remain a central figure in any coalition Netanyahu chose to form. This is determined by the increasing convergence of the messianic-nationalistic vision of “Greater Israel” and its sliding towards a more central position in the Israeli “state of mind”.

A more drastic electoral result was the almost-at-risk, wobbly, situation of Avigdor Lieberman’s party Yisrael Beitenu. Pre-polls showed a rapid decrease in the party’s attraction. Some estimates predicted a political decline of more than 50% in Knesset seats (4-5 seats out of the existing 11, or even a hypothetical disappearance). However, Yisrael Beitenu won 6 seats, hence, capable of determining future political developments. The almost 50% decrease in votes was largely due to dissatisfaction and delusion, much felt by the party’s traditional electorate. Suspicions about large-scale corruption (i.e. bribery and forgery) in the party’s ranks rose sharply, and police investigations were soon reported by Israeli media. Around 30 persons linked to Yisrael Beitenu were

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<sup>46</sup> Yachad failed to cross the electoral threshold (it received 2.97% of the vote) and did not enter the new Knesset.

<sup>47</sup> Yosef Lapid (1931-2008) was a writer, journalist and politician who headed the secular-liberal party Shinui (lit. “Change”) from 1999 to 2006.

<sup>48</sup> It is noteworthy to mention that the Ashkenazi ultra-orthodox party Yahadut HaTora HaMeuhedet (lit. “United Torah Judaism”) gained 6 seats in the 20<sup>th</sup> Knesset, after it had adopted a “non-sectorial” electoral campaign, basing it on social welfare and healthcare.

<sup>49</sup> See notes 43-44

investigated, including: lobbyists, local and regional representatives, CEOs of state-owned enterprises, heads of voluntary associations and members of Knesset. Furthermore, the often called “Extreme Right populist party”<sup>50</sup> was unable to mobilize the once loyal “Russian voice”. The unsuccessful political alliance with the Likud (dissolved in July 2014 after less than two years) left signs of panic and uncertainty. The extremely violent rhetoric endorsing the legislation of death penalty for Arab terrorists was too much desperate for the electorate to follow Lieberman’s shabby charisma. The non-sectorial vote is a real novelty (the party’s campaign itself lacked any videos or written messages in Russian). Thus, we may argue that the once self-referential, “ghettoed”, Russian-speaking community in Israel has found its place in more general-led politics. In this regard, some might consider the shift in favour of the Likud to be a re-centralisation process of Israeli Rightists. However, as said about Netanyahu’s “three day war”, it is more likely to assume that the fear of handing power to the Left was the factor which most influenced the Right-wing electorate to concentrate, rather than centralize, its vote.

Equally interesting is the centralisation-trend, though minor in scale, which implied changes in the inner-positioning of the Israeli Left; where social-democratic Zionist Meretz almost risked not passing the legal threshold because of the failing attempt to sign a surplus-vote agreement with the Joint List (which it had previously signed with the Zionist Union). In addition, the almost-fatal electoral position was largely due to the “cannibalisation” of votes by both the Zionist Union and Yesh Atid, as the electorate of reference is roughly overlapping (i.e. in the case of social-democratic Ashkenazi youth from Israel’s economic centre: the so-called “state of Tel-Aviv”). Nevertheless, after a nerve-racking electoral campaign and the promise to resign, – if Meretz disappeared from the new Knesset –, the party’s leader Zehava Gal-On, claiming Meretz’s place as Israel’s true “Left” by the call: “We Cannot Lose Meretz; It’s Up To You”, did succeed in re-gaining the party’s position in the Knesset (5 seats, only one seat less than the 6 it had won in the 2013 elections). Hence, the wish to create a less multi-polarized political system, by changing the electoral threshold, only partially achieved its goal, since it did not cause the vanishing of the more ideological poles in Israeli politics (at least in the short run).

Rather different is the electoral fortune of the Joint List. Since the a-Zionist Arab political conglomerate was the direct result of the new legal threshold, the inner disputes within the Arab leadership had to be placated (at least in appearance). The latter’s campaign (videos broadcasted in Arabic followed by Hebrew subtitles) envisaged Israel as an open-minded democracy enjoying high-tech industrial prosperity; but did not miss the opportunity to recall the expropriation of lands by Jewish hands in order to claim political

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<sup>50</sup> D. Filc, U. Lebel, “The Post-Oslo Israeli Populist Radical Right...cit.”.

justice. However, what had been promoted as an anti-racism alliance vs. Netanyahu's anti-Arab policies did not lead to a major shift in Israeli minorities' political preference (here we include the approximate two mandate power in the hand of Israeli Druze<sup>51</sup>). Although the Israeli Arab voice gained political momentum and large media coverage throughout the campaign, the 13 seats (446,583 votes) the Joint List now holds in the Israeli Parliament is by no means "explosive". It does not erode the hegemonic stability of the Jewish-centred party system. Moreover, it is unlikely the Joint List takes an active part in any nascent opposition, considering the traditional "refusal" to cooperate with any "Zionist agenda". Hence, the impressive result of the new-born sectorial party does not suggest a radical turning-point in political participation on the Israeli Arab street. The electoral achievement simply reflects the more gradual demographic change<sup>52</sup>, while uniting the usually divided Arab voice under the same political roof.

The political enterprise of the Zionist Union, founded on December 10<sup>th</sup> 2014, may be summarized in the total lack of political finesse. Though the alliance between HaAvoda (the Israeli Labour Party) and Hatnuah (lit. "The Movement")<sup>53</sup> was supposedly built on pragmatic shrewdness, – aiming to unite liberal Zionist peace-seeking voters around a competitive political power –, the centre-Left electorate viewed it as a mishmash of old-style opportunism (since Livni took part of Netanyahu's previous government) and a mere technical operation (in order to attract centre swing voters *vis-à-vis* Yesh Atid<sup>54</sup>) with no real ideological renewal<sup>55</sup>. The rather uncharismatic personalities of Isaac Herzog and Tzipi Livni and their technical discourses did not succeed in offering an appealing alternative to Netanyahu's rightist hegemony. Livni's choice to step back from the premiership-on-rotation clause (if the latter presented a hurdle to form a new government) 24 hours before the opening of the ballot box, only pointed out the survival despair of the two leaders and revealed their indecisiveness. In addition to the "one step forward, two steps

<sup>51</sup> In the new-elected Knesset this minority is represented by three MPs: Dr. Abdullah Abu Ma'aruf (placed 13<sup>th</sup> in the Joint List), Ayoob Kara (26<sup>th</sup> in the Likud List), and Hamad Amar (5<sup>th</sup> placed in Yisrael Beiteinu).

<sup>52</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> Knesset the Arab electorate joined 11 seats which were divided as follows: 4 Ra'am-Ta'al+3 Balad+4 Hadash (including the Jewish Member of Knesset Dov Khenin).

<sup>53</sup> The party was founded in 2012 by Tzipi Livni (who left Kadima) seeking to form a more liberal centre in Israeli politics.

<sup>54</sup> Though Yesh Atid was viewed as an electoral threat able to "steal" centrist votes from the ones Hatnuah was claiming to bring to the Zionist Union, it did not succeed in maintaining electoral support and won only 11 seats in the new Knesset (a sharp decline from the 19 it had won in 2013).

<sup>55</sup> The agreement to form the "Zionist Union" was followed by a wave of resignations of figureheads from Hatnua: former Major General Elazar Stern joined Yesh Atid, whereas Meir Sheerit, Amram Mitzna and David Tzur retired from politics altogether.

back” campaign, while Herzog was trying to place himself as a responsible leader (slogan: “Responsibility, the foundation for leadership”), and Tzipi Livni seemed absent, the Zionist Union’s campaign took a serious blow. On March 7<sup>th</sup>, a mass Left-wing rally (circa 60-80,000 people) took place in Rabin Square in Tel-Aviv. Its initiators called “Israel Wants Change”, thus endorsing pro-Zionist Union stances. The main speaker was former Director of Mossad Meri Dagan who overtly criticized Netanyahu’s policies. Nonetheless, the fervent support did not put out the provocative flames kindled by the opening speech, delivered by artist Yair Garbuz. The latter called for an all-citizens Israeli democracy, that Mizrahi Israelis (the Sephardi), other religious people, and Right-voters were primitive, ignorant, corrupted and extremist; a menace to democracy. The speech generated a wide range of political reactions. But the accusations of elitism and racism were not appeased, since the Ashkenazi elitist couple Herzog and Livni were soon identified with Garbuz’s views. Political miscalculations, lack of charisma and “on-the-paper” popularity impeded the creation of wide and solid electoral support; placing the Zionist Union second largest among Israeli parties (with 24 seats).

### *Conclusions:*

#### *A Tricky Political “State of Mind”?*

Following the scope conditions the article laid out, it seems the last legislative elections, held on March 17<sup>th</sup> 2015, did not modify the political “self” of Israel. The perception of “security” in geopolitical terms rapidly liquidated the demands for welfare security originated in the social justice protests of 2011. National security is still a predominant issue buzzing and echoing throughout the Israeli vote. Fear from the “other” (i.e. the “Arabs”; perceived as internal and external threat alike) still dictates the priorities in Israelis’ own political mind-sets.

Furthermore, the waves of legalistic discourse concerning consolidated norms and practices have declined *vis-à-vis* the increasing drift towards the personalisation of party politics and the charisma-built suitability to govern a complicated society. Both features confirm the presence and use of demagoguery as well as what may be categorized as neo-populism. In other words, political leaderships adopt and adapt old commonplaces and slogans to gain electoral consensus rather than to provide alternatives to the fragile socio-cultural *status quo* which makes Israel a laboratory of political tensions. These trends place Israel in the “uncomfortable” zone with other mature western democracies. The indicator to this is the almost gossip-like tones accompanying the campaign which emphasized neither the role the two candidates aspired to,

nor the parties as political alternatives. This was also evident in the form of various antagonisms concerning identity-based issues such as ethnicity, religion and socio-economic background. The institutional reform of the Knesset's legal threshold seems to have been a minor factor in determining the balance of party representation, as the Israeli Parliament still remains multipolar and fragmented. In addition, the structural move did not placate the agitating waters of Israel's "sectorial" voting preferences, where inner\outer contentious dynamics involved some key-politicians (i.e. Moshe Kahlon but mainly the Yishai-Deri rupture) while demonstrating a highly antagonistic competition between leaders, sometimes even regardless of ideological stances. Nonetheless, it did generate more or less inclusive alliances between some existing parties (namely the cases of the Joint List and the Zionist Union). Despite these political shifts and intrigues, the electoral results manifest the weight and fragility of Israeli socio-cultural fabric as determinants of what may seem as socio-political conservatism.

In more general terms, the paper has tackled the concept of "state of mind" which has not yet been used to contextualize singular political events (such as elections). Matching the latter with more common conceptual frameworks (e.g. identity, discourse, and even ideology) may contribute to bridge the gaps between long-range political trajectory and more punctual events without renouncing the multi-factorial and processual analyses. The adaptation of the traditional use of "state of mind", focused on perceptions and values, to the sociopolitical analysis of elections further solidifies the connection between political culture and political practices.