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WEBINAR

What's at stake in the Israeli election?

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INTRODUCTION

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PANEL DISCUSSION

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MALONEY: Good morning to those joining us from the East Coast or Washington, DC, and welcome to all of you who are joining us from around the world. I'm Suzanne Maloney, vice president and director of Foreign Policy here at the Brookings Institution. And on behalf of Brookings, I'm really delighted to help launch today's timely conversation on the upcoming Israeli national election.

As you all surely know, Israelis will go to the polls on October 27th to elect the 26th Knesset in the first general vote since the October 7th attacks and the subsequent war in Gaza, Lebanon, and Iran. This election obviously comes at a pivotal moment for Israelis and their neighbors, which is why I'm so grateful that we've brought together a panel of world-class experts on Israeli politics who bring a wide range of deeply informed perspectives.

The panel will be introduced and moderated by Joel Braunold, managing director of the Center Project and contributing editor at Lawfare. After the panel's discussion, we'll open up to audience questions, so please feel free to send your questions via email to events@brookings.edu. I want to note that this event is live and on the record, live streamed via the Brookings website as well as YouTube.

I'll also note that as an independent, nonpartisan organization, Brookings does not take institutional positions on issues. I'll now turn the mic over to our moderator, Joel Braunold, to introduce our expert panel and get the discussion underway. Joel, the floor is yours.

BRAUNOLD: Thanks so much, Suzanne, and it's really my pleasure that I could join you all today and moderate what I think will be an exceptionally interesting and informative panel.

As Suzanne mentioned, my name is Joel Braunold. I'm the managing director at the Center Project and a contributing editor at Lawfare. And I've for the past 16 years professionally been working in and around issues around the region and specifically Israeli-Palestinian issues, and had a chance to work with many of the different political parties and candidates who are standing in this election that should happen in five days.

If our panelists can turn on their cameras at this point. Before I turn to them to introduce themselves, just a quick disclaimer. One of our speakers today, Jeremy Saltan, is a candidate on a party list in the upcoming Israeli election. For our Brookings event today, Jeremy is not participating in his candidate capacity. He is solely participating as a political analyst. We had invited Jeremy to speak at this event this past summer before he was on a party list. As such, he has agreed to follow Brookings guidelines and will only speak to his expertise as an analyst. He is not appearing as a candidate, and we will not be taking questions about his candidacy or his campaign.

With that said I'll turn to each of our panelists to introduce themselves. We'll start with Dahlia.

SCHEINDLIN: Hello. Thank you, excuse me, and thank you to Brookings for hosting this. I'm Dr. Dahlia Scheindlin. I'm a public opinion researcher, political analyst, and I've advised on nine national election campaigns in Israel since 1999. I am not working on any political campaign right now, and I'm a senior columnist at Haaretz Newspaper in English.

In addition to some other hats I'm a non-resident senior fellow at the Center for International Policy and I'm looking forward to this conversation.

BRAUNOLD: Thanks, Dahlia. Thair?

ABU RAS: Hi. Good morning to all of you and, and thank you for having me. Actually, I was a student at the University of Maryland, and as such, I had the honor of visiting Brookings on many opportunities, so it's really a great honor to participate as a panelist.

After I left Maryland, I moved back to Israel and I'm currently the director of the Forum for Regional Thinking. The Forum for Regional Thinking is the only joint Jewish-Palestinian think tank in Israel and Palestine. We have dozens of researchers, academics, journalists who are affiliated with us. We provide analyses and reports from a more critical basis from a more critical lens on issues that are happening in both Israel and Palestine. And we are affiliated with the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, which one of, is one of the most prominent leading research centers in Israel today.

BRAUNOLD: Thanks, and Jeremy?

SALTAN: I've held... thank you, Joel, thank you, Brookings, and of course to everyone for tuning in. I've held a various number of positions in elected, appointed, and advisory positions over the last 17 years in the center right and in the national religious community. I have an expertise when it comes to, of course, elections, campaigns, and polls, big reasons of what it is that brings us here to speak today, and I'm looking forward.

BRAUNOLD: Thanks so much. The first question is to, to all of our panel. This election is being described as the most consequential election in Israel's history. What are the main issues driving Israelis to vote in this election compared to previous elections, and what feels different about this particular election?

We'll turn firstly to you, Dahlia.

SCHEINDLIN: Thank you. It's a great opening question. I think that in every Israeli election that I've ever worked on, the campaigns that I've advised have tried hard to convince their voters that this is the most consequential and historic elections in Israeli history. I think the difference this time is that nobody needs to be convinced.

You don't even really hear the parties saying it because people themselves are saying it all the time in conversation. And I do think there's a little bit of a difference in the way Israeli supporters of the coalition speak about this versus Israeli supporters of opposition parties. They look at this quite differently.

It becomes increasingly difficult to talk about how Israelis think about it because these are such polarized, you know, really differentiated worldviews. But let's start with supporters of the coalition. I think that they're seeing this as, you know, the most consequential election because they believe that only Netanyahu and a government that, of the kind that he has been leading will really be defiant against external pressures and continue with a strong military approach to resolving Israel's problems and keeping Israel safe.

They believe very firmly that Israel needs to extend its borders and its sovereignty over all of the West Bank, all of Gaza, right? This is basically something that comes from most of the senior ministers, including in the Likud party. It's no longer just something from the far-right

parties. And they believe that Israel will continue, will need to continue fighting active wars against Hezbollah and Lebanon, and Israel should stay in Lebanon, including remaining in its positions in Syria and probably go to war with Iran again.

The defiance against outside pressure also leads to, I think, a mindset in which Israel is on its own. Israel cannot depend on outsiders, and therefore I get asked a lot, don't, you know, don't Israelis care about their image in the rest of the world? And I think for the supporters of the government, it's just secondary. They believe that the world has never, you know, protected or supported Israel or Jews, and that they have to do it themselves. And if that means looking bad in the eyes of the world, it's completely secondary.

It's also driven by, I would say, you know, for about maybe roughly half of the supporters of the government, very much by a religious fundamentalist ideology. And I say fundamentalist advisedly. This is not just about, you know, religion and politics a little bit. This is really a different kind of Jewish fundamentalism that has, you know, become an extremely influential force driving the government's policies of this current government. And those people, for them, it's a matter of cosmology, right? They want to continue that direction.

Now, that accounts for about 40 to 43% of voters in polls who say they are supporting the current government. That is roughly the strength and a very stable bloc supporting the current government. Remember that in, even in the last election in 2022, the parties of the current coalition won 48.38% of the votes, of all the votes cast. So it's only a little bit lower than the result in 2022, but significant.

And then we turn to the rest of the voters who are supporting opposition parties, at least that's what they're telling pollsters. So we have, you know, just over half, just over 50%, because I'm leaving out the undecided and the non-voters, who say they are voting for parties of the opposition. And for those people, this is absolutely an existential question of what kind of country Israel will be, whether it is a country that recommits to strong democratic institutions.

You know, and I, I am cautious about saying returning to a liberal democracy because I think Israel has not really been a liberal democracy, certainly not in recent years. But that is in the vision of those people supporting the opposition. They want Israel to be that. They are deeply afraid of the encroachment of theocratic forces in Israeli governance. They believe that their personal freedoms will be curtailed, you know, similar to what the protesters felt during 2023 with the attempt to undermine the independence of the Israeli judiciary. And they are deeply alienated by a government they see as corrupt.

Please remember that Mr. Netanyahu is, is still on trial on three counts of corruption. They believe he is making his decisions purely in order to stay in power with the only coalition partners that will have him, and that he's willing to sell out the country in any direction for the sake of staying in power.

And I think that, you know, I don't wanna overstate the case because these are, you know, most of the opposition supporters are not particularly supportive of peace or a two-state solution or ending occupation, but they do see, you know, something sort of a dark fear in a future in which Israel permanently and formally annexes all of the West Bank and Gaza because they're seeing, you know, what's happening in the West Bank and these rounds of, you know, increasingly extremist, violent Israelis going around and, you know, really

committing terror attacks. And I think that they see that as a kind of harbinger for what, what it will look like if Israel retains that kind of permanent annexation over all Palestinians.

Again, it's not really coming from a place of soft, warm, you know, conciliatory feelings, but just that Israel doesn't really need that. Plus, most of these opposition supporters very much believe in a Jewish majority in Israel, and so they don't really want to annex completely all of the West Bank and Gaza. And I think that they would be happy to deescalate and stop, you know, devoting their lives to hundreds and hundreds of days of reserve duty, which has been, you know, a severe burden on Israeli society, Israeli Jewish society.

Now, at the-- one more point about two very specific policies that pretty much every party in the opposition is supporting, including even on the first one, parties representing Arab citizens of Israel, and that is a state commission of inquiry, which is, you know, seems like a very specific issue to outsiders, but it is enormous. It looms very large in Israeli life right now.

And the second issue is the conscription of the ultra-Orthodox, which is an, you know, very, very ironclad commitment of all the Zionist opposition parties. And of course, that's deeply opposed to the current government, which would prefer to protect the ultra-Orthodox from the draft, shield them from the draft.

So those are burning, divisive, but very, very specific issues. In a way, those, those very pinpointed issues for a lot of Israelis have overshadowed the bigger and deeper issues in the campaign. And I'll stop there, and thank you.

BRAUNOLD: Thanks so much. Thair.

ABU RAS: Yeah, so I'll focus a little bit on Israel's largest minority, which are the Palestinian Israelis or the Arab Palestinian minority in Israel. And for this community, without a doubt, the main the main force that's energizing them is the rise of the far right in Israel.

So the far right, which was once on the margins of the Israeli political system, have now become the mainstream and a legitimate part of the mainstream. Nobody even questions the fact that they are now in such central positions of power. So the Ministry of National Security, which is responsible for police and policing, is led by Itamar Ben-Gvir, someone who a decade ago was considered to be on the extreme far right, should be nowhere near policy or decision-making. And just like in the United States, when it comes to Israel, there's also a lot of sensitivities on policing and minority and whatnot.

I mean, the minister of finance, who is responsible at the end of the day for allocating budgets to different communities and cleavages in Israel, is also someone from the extreme far right. And, and over the last four years, we have seen them use their power in a way that has negatively affected the Arab minority in Israel.

So if we, if we take the minister of national security, under his watch, we saw an exponential rise in the amount in homicide rates in the Arab community in Israel and the rise of organized crime and violence, which is the number one issue that Arab voters care about. According to polls, over 70% of Arab voters want their representatives to mainly deal with this issue. Over the last roughly 20 years, we, we have this new phenomenon encroach into our community of, of organized crime and violence. And year after year the number of, of

victims has increased. And under Ben-Gvir specifically the numbers have just reached ridiculous numbers that the government has failed to deal with.

If we take into consideration the finance minister, Smotrich. So for example, he's been taking away budgets that the government allocated to the Arab community on, you know, employment projects, budgets that have to do with you know, local councils and municipalities being able to function. At the end of the day, Arab citizens are taxpayers in the state of Israel, but what they receive in return has always been low, but under this government even less. And the finance minister increased his anti-minority policies over the last summer, for example, when for the first time we saw an illegal outpost being built right next to an Arab town in the Galilee in northern Israel, in the town of Majd al-Krum.

You know, these are phenomenons that we are used to seeing in the West Bank, where the state of Israel sends in settlers to build outposts on Palestinian land, or sometimes on land that is not privately owned by anyone, and then to expand them in order to settle in Jewish communities there. In the case of the Arab Palestinian community in Israel, roughly 80% of our private land has been confiscated. And so the state of Israel hasn't been in this confiscation projects for a few decades now. But now under the under the leadership of the far right, it seems that the Israeli government has returned basically to these kinds of policies, and that has angered many, many people.

But also other issues are very important. The war in Gaza, for example, has angered a lot of people, the way it was handled, and there's a general feeling in the community that if the Israeli government does not shift course, and if it continues to behave the way it has been behaving in Gaza and the West Bank, it's only a matter of time until such policies would be implemented inside Israel.

There's this general feeling that at the end of the day, we are part of the Palestinian people, and if Israel treats the Palestinians in more, or uses more coercive policies towards the Palestinians in Gaza or the West Bank, then it's just a matter of time until such policies will also be used against us.

Just last week, the finance minister, again, Smotrich who's also a minister in the Ministry of Defense, so he has some influence over security policy in Israel and military policy, said, for example, that the Arabs are holding their heads high in Israel. They're, they're acting as if they own the country or they own the place, and this kind of gives you an insight into the mentality of the man, and if he's given more and more power, he would be using it against Israel's largest minority.

So I would argue these are the two main factors that are driving people to come out and vote, and they are the issues that most people discuss in, in the internal dialogue in the Arab community in Israel.

BRAUNOLD: Thanks. Jeremy?

SALTAN: I think there are four main issues that we're seeing in this election, and they're also viewed upon differently by four different groups or blocs that are running in this election, and I'll go through each one.

In terms of the topics, we have the issue of the State Inquiry Commission. We also have the issue of the enlistment of the Ultra Orthodox Haredi draft. We also have the issue of Netanyahu. And we have the question of, is this gonna be a conclusive election in which there is a final result where there is a government, or we're gonna have a situation where we're gonna have another round similar to the snap elections that transpired between the time of 2019 and 2022?

So I said there are also four different groups, and each one of them are, is looking at this issue very differently. We have the five coalition parties led by Netanyahu and his bloc, which obviously have their own view. You have the four opposition blo- parties running in their bloc, which sees things from their perspective.

You have the two Arab lists that are running in this election. I should point out that both of them have a Jew in a realistic spot on both of those lists. So even though it's an Arab led party, the Jews are represented in those two parties. Then there's the fourth bloc of the parties that are not passing the threshold, because overall, and th- this might sound a little bit ridiculous to some of the people listening, but we have 38 parties contesting this election, right? So we know that about three quarters of them are obviously not gonna get past and and we're not gonna spend much time talking about them.

Going back to the first issue. The first issue of the State Inquiry Commission about what happened October 7th, Dalia touched upon this. It's a very important issue to Israelis. It's important For, for everybody. On the coalition bloc, they are trying to block it. They've successfully blocked any attempt to move in this direction since October 7, right? The three years they've been able to go ahead and block this. So what they wanna do is create some sort of commission in which they're able to choose who's on the panel, what it is that they're able to check in terms of the scope, and in a way figure out what it is that will end up being the final result. The opposition is looking for the Supreme Court to be the ones to go ahead and name the panelists as well as the scope of what's gonna happen within that, and we see very many times throughout this campaign, both the coalition and the opposition going at each other on that issue.

The second issue of the enlistment of the Haredim, of the ultra-Orthodox, is also a very big issue. It's caused a lot of problems for Netanyahu within his governing coalition. Along on one side, trying to have the two Haredi parties happy and not breaking with him, and then on the other side, dealing with the more national religious population that are voting for the other two parties on the further right from the Likud, in which he has to maintain this balance.

In the opposition, of course, there is a consensus that this is a main issue that needs to be dealt with. The amount of time reservists have had to spend within uniform over this last three years, not just dealing with Gaza, but also with the other security challenges when it comes to Lebanon, Syria, and elsewhere, has put this front and center. And although this is a domestic issue, this is really much at the heart of what Israelis are thinking about before they go to the polls.

The third issue of Netanyahu is something really that we've had for many elections. Should we have Netanyahu? Should we not have Netanyahu? How should Netanyahu leave if he does leave? And all of those type of questions. Trying to make this a referendum about Netanyahu is definitely something that is a part of this election, but it is not the issue in this election, because as I said, the reality of Israel after October 7th has really put us in a

different direction. That leads me to the fourth and final issue that everyone is talking about, and that is what is gonna be in terms of the final results.

According to the final results in every poll you look at, it is inconclusive, assuming that nobody is actually lying, so that, that, that means we're gonna have a second election. So there's a lot of questions towards the red lines of each party, what flexibility they're willing to go ahead and have. And then of course, with the Arab parties, what role could they play or not play in the question of perhaps replacing this government, or having some sort of security net, or the various other options that I'm sure we'll get into- throughout this panel.

The last thing I'll, I'll say on that is, is the issue of the parties that are not passing the threshold. Many of them are saying that they're the solution if they're able to go ahead and pass electoral threshold, which today is at 3.25% of the overall vote, that they will be the answer that will be able to move us away from this inconclusive result.

Based on polls, it doesn't matter if there's one party passing or not, whether it's more on the Netanyahu bloc or more on the opposition bloc. We see that in the end, it really does not bring us to any type of solution, and I'm sure we'll also talk about that as we go on. Thanks, Joel.

BRAUNOLD: Thanks. I wanna turn, Dahlia to you on this specific question. You know, as Jeremy said, I think that it, it seems inconclusive, or the polling doesn't seem to indicate what the next government will look like, but it does seem to be quite indicative about what the next Knesset would look like. So our listeners understand, Israel's a parliamentary democracy. The government is drawn from the legislature, so the lists in terms of who will make up the 120 body seems slightly more clear than how a coalition will be cobbled together.

So it, it'll be great to hear from you a little bit about what does the proposed makeup of the Knesset tell us about Israel in terms of as we look at the polling?

SCHEINDLIN: Great. Thank you. I, I think that what I would like to do is argue that there are two things that are very clear from the polls, even though we have-- the polls are giving us no indication of who the next government will be, as you've all correctly point out, pointed out.

One thing that's very clear is that Netanyahu's current coalition is-- seems very unlikely to reach a majority, and there's, you know, only, at this point, only one pollster out of eight different mainstream pollsters who show the current coalition barely getting a majority at 61 or 63 parliamentary seats. All the other pollsters, including one more right-wing pollster, have them at below 60 seats. But the vast majority of polls show them way below, at 50 to 51 seats on average.

And that has been an extremely stable, you know, aspect of polling for the last two years, which means that we do quite well know that the opposition parties as a whole, when I mean-- when I say opposition, I mean every party that is not in the current government or has not endorsed the current government they're getting 65 to 70 parliamentary seats. So we know that.

But the other thing we know is that you know... And, and so, well, all to say that those opposition parties clearly have a majority as far as it looks, unless we're, like, terribly surprised, but they are deeply internally divided, as both of my colleagues, you know, explained, because of the coalition-building dynamics and the self-imposed constraints of the Zionist parties on not including a party that represents Arab or Palestinian citizens in Israel. So, that is the one thing we know.

The other thing we know is that parties representing right-wing ideology, now how do I type that? I will explain, but parties that are pretty unambiguously right-wing in their ideology will probably win between 74 and 76 parliamentary seats out of 120. And when I say right-wing parties, I am not even including the party of Gadi Eisenkot, Yesh Atid, which I think many Israelis view as center, maybe leaning right. You know, from the right wing they view it as center leaning left, of course. They-- anybody who's not with Netanyahu is left-wing. But even leaving that out, because they've been a little bit, you know, a little bit more ambiguous about their actual ideology, if you have to include Avigdor Lieberman as a right-wing party, and I would argue you have to include Bennett as a right-wing party, even though it's two constituent parties and, you know, Yesh Atid, the other constituent party, is very centrist. But Bennett himself comes from the firm right. He began his political career to the right of Netanyahu, and most of his positions have been very consistent over the years.

So if you add those all up, you know, those polls have been extremely stable as well. And I think, you know, the reason why I say that I think we know this with some confidence is because, in general, over the last many cycles that I've been tracking or working on, when you ask Israelis about their self-defined ideology as left, right, or center, and this is particularly true for the Jewish population because they have a very clear sense of where they are on that spectrum, where many more Arab or Palestinian citizens don't wanna answer that question. But in general, we see between 60 and 63%, roughly, of Israeli Jews identify themselves as right-wing.

And given that there, in the, you know, in the recent past has been quite a turnout gap between Jewish and Arab citizens who are voting, you know, the vast majority of voters who actually turn out tended to be Jewish. And so the results were very closely correlated in terms of the percentage breakdown for parties representing right-wing ideological positions quite close to the number of Israeli Jews who identify as right-wing and, you know, correspondingly centrist and left-wing parties. Although the left very much breaks themselves up between left-wing or what Israelis view as left-wing parties and centrist parties.

And I think we have to take that into account because even without knowing who will form the next government, it, you know, having a Knesset that is so heavily dominated by right-wing ideology says something about the direction of lawmaking in Israel, right? The, the government will surely include right-wing parties, whichever government it is, and that, you know, includes if it's a government led by Yesh Atid, which some would argue is leaning right anyway.

And so that is, you know, really a, a kind of an understanding of what I would say are the, the sort of outlines of where Israeli policy will go in the next number of years, even if it's a, even if it right wing may mean something different from what the current government has done, you know, based on the distinction I tried to make earlier between a fundamentalist, you know, expansionist ideology and a more...

Well, we'll get into the policy differences soon, but I think that if there's an opposition that's in power, and it is, as I've argued, leaning right wing, it will probably take on positions that look quite a bit more like some of Mr. Netanyahu's positions before October 7th. You know, trying to keep things at a, you know, a, an equilibrium, which I think is personally an illusion as we saw on October 7th.

But I wouldn't be surprised if future governments, you know, tries to go back to that.

BRAUNOLD: Thair, I want to turn to you. You know, you mentioned in your opening remarks in terms of all the reasons why there would be a high turnout in your community, in the Palest- in the Arab citizens of Israel community.

And, you know, analysts and pollsters are seeing that. We've seen in the polls the rise between Ra'am and the Joint List sort of getting between 13 and 15 seats which is a significant amount. But what would it mean for the community as you mentioned, Israel's largest minority, if there is high turnout but there is no change in government or government policy towards your, you, the community, given the self-imposed boycotts that the various different Zionist parties are putting on them?

ABU RAS: Without a doubt, that is one of the big fears that the political elites in the community have, especially in the Ra'am party because in many ways they're risking a lot. They've acquiesced a lot on demands on narrative and identity. So, Mansour Abbas famously recognized Israel as a Jewish state even though if you talk to him personally, he would tell you that's not exactly what he said. He just accepted the fact that that's how it is, but he does not necessarily endorse that.

They have steered away from the Palestinian issue as much as possible. The Ra'am party in particular, they prefer to talk, if they're gonna mention the Palestinian question, they usually like to talk about incursions into the Al-Aqsa Mosque. That's as far as they would go in, you know, criticizing Israeli policy. They almost never talk about settlements, for example. They've given up a lot. They've compromised a lot in their language and in the narrative that they use in order to be accepted by the, the Change Coalition as it's known. The anti-Netanyahu camp in Israel is known as the Change Coalition. And in return, publicly at least, every single leader of that of the Change Coalition, except one, the leader of the Democrats, Yair Golan, the except for him, all the others have basically declared that they would not cooperate with Mansour Abbas.

Even Gadi Eizenkot who wants to be prime minister, and if he can do the math, he can see that he has really no path to 61 seats without Ra'am, has made it clear just the, the day before yesterday in a podcast, that he will not recruit the Ra'am party. And he argued that that's because Ra'am does not accept his four famous demands, even though Ra'am actually does accept his four famous demands.

So, we're gonna have to wait till after election day to see what will happen there. And I say we have to wait till after election day because at least if you talk to the Ra'am leadership, they say they're not taking, you know, all these statements about not cooperating with them very seriously.

They say as Dahlia mentioned, Israel's a very right-wing place. There's a lot of mistrust towards Arab parties. But after the elections, after the election results, there's a new day.

The Ra'am Party is coordinating behind the scenes with a lot of these parties on the center and what is known as the moderate right that are part of the change coalition.

And obviously, the change coalition would prefer to reach 61 Jewish Zionist seats on itself. It would also prefer to have a partner from the Jewish Zionist right, but if it does not have that partner at the end of the day, and again, according to polls, that option is not really viable for them, they will take Ra'am.

That is what the Ra'am Party believes, and that's ... And, and basically, they will be full members of the coalition. But it's not only Ra'am anymore. Even the joint list has shifted kind of its language. Up until a few months ago, they wanted to maintain the classical position of Arab parties, which is to immediately go into the opposition, not take part in coalition politics.

Historically, Arab parties have refused to take part in coalition politics in Israel. The argument is that as long as the occupation persists, we cannot be part of an Israeli government because of the responsibility or the group responsibility doctrine, which basically argues that if you are part of a coalition government, you're responsible for that government's policies, which would include actions against the Palestinians, against the Al-Aqsa Mosque, whatever it is, and obviously no Arab party, it wants to be there.

But even the joint list has now shifted away from that. The Arab community's most veteran politician, Ahmad Tibi, who's number two on the joint list, came out with a plan where basically instead of joining the coalition like Mansour Abbas would like to do, he's talking about what he calls ad hoc cooperation.

So ad hoc cooperation is basically to work with the Eisenkot coalition, with the change coalition, on a number of general issues that they're generally in agreement with them on. So for example, rolling back the judicial overhaul, the rules, the you know, the legislations that were passed in early 2023 that kind of limited the judicial branch in Israel and strengthened the executive branch, turning Israel into, you know, a, Orban Hungary style kind of democracy. And the Joint List wants to cooperate with the Change Coalition on that. Naftali Bennett came out just yesterday, I believe, and said they're going to roll back the judicial overhaul law. So that's one, one area where they can cooperate with them.

Another area where they want to cooperate is to replace the speaker of the Knesset, who is considered to be notoriously anti minority rights in Israel. Another issue that they want to work with the coalition, with the Change Coalition on is term limits, which would prevent Netanyahu from returning to power. So whether it's a two-term limit, 10-year limit on being prime minister, Netanyahu has passed all these thresholds, and together with the Change Coalition, they could theoretically pass legislation that would prevent Netanyahu from running again.

Ahmad Tibi, the veteran politician, had even hinted to the fact that the Joint List is willing to not participate in no confidence votes against a Eisenkot government for the first 12 months of that government. So even the Joint List, which historically is considered to be, well, at least from an Israeli perspective, to be more radical than Ra'am or more anti-establishment, anti-Zionist, call it whatever you want, they're willing nowadays to cooperate just to get rid of the current government and the folks in the far right that are in power to send them into the opposition seats.

So, in the Arab community the expectation is turnout is going to increase this time, but the voters want that turnout to be translated into political influence and to take part in changing the political makeup of the current Israeli government. And if at the end of the day they don't get that, then that would be that would, that would not be very helpful for the cause of, you know, Arab belief in Israeli democracy.

If we end up having elections in four or five months from now, which is also a very viable scenario, I would expect that Arab turnout would decrease quite a lot, which obviously would play right into the hands of the Netanyahu coalition.

BRAUNOLD: Jeremy, just picking up on what Thair just said, I think an interesting question. You know, we've seen, it seems, an explosion in people trying to reach out to the National Religious Community, which I know that, you know, in your introduction you said you're a member of. We're seeing candidates with kippot religious candidates across many of the different political parties from Gadi Eisenkot's party to Bennett's party, of course. Lieberman's even, despite being an avowed secular, has added religious members to his party. Is this reach out to the National Religious camp one of the reasons that all the things that Thair just said about the Arab parties' desire to help replace the current coalition? Is that one of the reasons why the change bloc won't, you know, even consider any of these options? What do you think is going on?

SALTAN: I think that really the reason why we're in this situation of the positions that we saw both from Lieberman and Bennett are not necessarily directly connected to the national religious community. I think it's, again, it's just the atmosphere of after October 7th, and of course the fact is Dahlia also said very correctly, a majority of Israelis are on the right, and of course there's, there's an understanding in terms of the change bloc, if you are not talking at all to right-wing voters then there's no chance at all to, to, to form any sort of coalition that would get a majority.

Again, and we mentioned the Netanyahu issue earlier. If Netanyahu was not running, in a non-Netanyahu reality it's the Likud very easily with whoever's leading it forming the next government with a coalition that I agree with Dahlia, gets over 70 seats, maybe 75 seats. That's just not the reality of where we are today.

But going back to the national religious aspect, I, I think it's important to say that this is the victory rather of the national religious public, that they're in every single party, right? In both the coalition and the opposition. Of course, there's also a candidate in the top five even in the Democrats, right? The Labor Meretz merger. So you, you're in a situation where the, wearing the kippah, wearing the yarmulke is something that does not take you out of consideration, whether it is a primary party which votes for every, each and every candidate, or ones where you have the party leaders selecting their list.

And I would say also on the other hand, you have party leaders who are religious who are choosing secular candidates. So we're in a situation where the national religious public has completely integrated into Israeli society. If we go back and look at the beginning during the Mapai years of '48 to '77, where the religious and the Haredi, for instance, in the first Knesset even ran together, we're very far from there.

The Haredi are still only running in religious parties, where the religious are having secular people in their parties and secular are having national religious in their parties. And you

know, I'll say one last thing on what Thair had mentioned. You know, I, I think back also in terms of the Arab population the ad hoc cooperation which he's talking about is something that's happened throughout the years with within the Knesset. It's just not something that's been talked about over the table.

But up until 1977 when Mapai was in charge, they did have you know, a few satellite parties of Arab citizens that voted for parties that then went ahead and cooperated with the Mapai majority. Even if they weren't actually sitting within the government and get ministries, they still had some sort of cooperation.

And it's very easy to look at how this is in some way, coming full circle to what we saw in the beginning of the state in terms of their population compared to the national religious population, where they are completely departing from their original connection running together with the Haredi Ultra Orthodox parties.

BRAUNOLD: Dahlia, now you wanted to come in?

SCHEINDLIN: Yeah, thank you. I'd like to maybe, you know, respectfully critique a little bit some of the ... or respond to some of Jeremy's points. One, one is actually I wasn't expecting you to raise the satellite parties. I would caution against that being a model for any sort of constructive partnership because those satellite parties were established under coercive military regime that was ruling Arab citizens.

They were mainly contractors. They were basically vote contractors who bought Arab votes by handing out, you know, things like permits in order for Palestinian citizens to just move or establish a business or do anything. So I would not use that as a great model of cooperation, although it is true that they were brought into the coalition, it was mostly for, i- in a way, for show.

But of course, I do wanna go back to the question of the real reasons why the opposition parties are, excuse me, are saying they will not go in with Arab parties. And something that Jeremy said is something that we hear from a lot of the politicians in those, I would say mostly in the... Well, I mean, not so much Eisenkot, but I think from Beyachad and from Lieberman and from various other politicians within that space, that after October 7th, this is not appropriate.

And I think that we should really point out that that is frankly, you know, it's a, it's a lie. I mean, it, it implies, I mean, they're saying it, but it implies that somehow Palestinian citizens of Israel are in some way connected to October 7th, and that therefore after October 7th, we can't have partnership with them.

It is such a, you know, complete... It, it's divorced from any empirical reality. Palestinian citizens of Israel were victims of October 7th, just like Jewish Israelis. And so there's no, there should be no connection. And so when political leaders say that, I feel like it is a, you know, a self-imposed choice to reinforce that idea among the Israeli public, which excuse me again, doesn't really have any, you know, doesn't have any connection with the reality of that community or its politicians.

Having said that there's another point- which is that I think given how right-wing much of Israeli society is, it's true that when surveys ask you know, Jewish citizens would they

support you know, bringing an Arab party into the coalition, usually a slim majority oppose it. But all the rest would be open to one of the various means of an Arab party joining, either formally joining or supporting from the outside or the ad hoc cooperation, et cetera.

And then one of the most interesting surveys I've seen was actually conducted by the most right-wing pollster in Israel, Shlomo Filber, asking, "Do you believe the opposition will keep its promises not to go into a coalition with Arab parties?" And the majority, I think it was over 60% across the board, said, "No, we don't trust them," and especially among opposition supporters.

Meaning, everybody expects these parties to break their promises. If you look at all of the support by coalition versus opposition for some po- sort of cooperation, you have at least 50% among opposition supporters, all opposition supporters, for one of those forms of cooperation. And so from a strategic, you know, analysis, there's no reason why, you know, a firm, you know, leadership position on this, like leading the public to accept and normalize the idea wouldn't work, right?

Because we already have very significant openness for some of those forms of cooperation, especially if politicians tell the truth that the Arab citizens of Israel and their parties have no connection to October 7th, and it's, it's really damaging to, you know, continue making that case. So this is a respectful critique to Jeremy, but much more against the political leadership saying those things.

BRAUNOLD: Okay. Jeremy, if you wanna respond, and then we'll go to Thair, and then I'll do one last question before we go to the audience.

SALTAN: Yeah, a quick response. In no way am I trying to excuse the Ben-Gurion Mapai from the martial law of the early years, which of course Levi Eshkol ended already before the Six-Day War. But I'm just saying that exact system continued until 1977 with really the foundation of Hadash, which led to the current structure that we really have in terms of how the, the Arab parties look at themselves today. But I just wanted to point out that that, that did exist also after the end of martial law.

And second of all, again, I'm not going ahead and taking a moral position on, on the issue. I'm saying the, the, the fact is that a lot of Israelis do feel that there is a difference after October 7th. And like you said, there are multiple parties, including party leaders within the change bloc, which are going ahead and saying that publicly.

And obviously they're saying that because there are, there's quite a few things within various polls they're conducting that tell them that it does make sense to say so.

ABU RAS: Yeah, no, just very quickly. Obviously I agree with Dahlia here. The satellite parties as they were known, and they were the most prominent parties in the '50s, '60s, and '70s, were not independent parties. Also they did not identify as Palestinian, as opposed to the other mainstream Arab parties that take roughly 85% of the vote in the Arab community today. So it was a very different situation. The dynamics of Jewish-Arab relations were very different than at the time. The political rights of, of the Arab community in Israel were much more limited than than they are today.

That being said obviously the Arab citizens of Israel were also victims of October 7th, and when Israeli politicians keep on saying that they cannot join a coalition with an Arab party because of October 7th, I mean, the only conclusion you can really reach is that, you know, that's just a racist statement.

Because again, Arab citizens, not only did they not have anything to do with October 7th, but they played a positive role in the first days and weeks after October 7th, because state institutions simply crumbled in Israel in the immediate aftermath after October 7th. So a lot of humanitarian aid distribution centers were opened in the Arab community. The second-largest humanitarian aid distribution center next to Gaza was actually opened in Rahat, which is the biggest Arab town in Southern Israel and the closest also Arab city to the Gaza Strip and the Gaza envelope. So that's just one example.

And even the Ra'am Party, which is trying to join a coalition. First of all, both Arab parties vehemently came out against October 7th. But then, in the Ra'am Party, we even had a situation a few weeks after October 7th when one of the members of the Knesset of that party came out and called the accusations of rape on October 7th a hoax, which is obviously is a very sensitive issue. And the leader of the Ra'am Party, Mansour Abbas, asked that member of the Knesset to basically leave the party altogether. So, when it comes to the events of October 7th and everything surrounding it, there was no toleration whatsoever on the side of Arab parties towards, you know, trying to question any of the events or even some kind of mild approval or even a but. You know, "October 7th is horrible, but..." So, from the, from the standpoint of the Arab community, we should not be paying the price of that.

I will end though with something a little bit optimistic, and obviously Dahlia knows a lot more about polls than I do. But as we get closer to election day, the supporters of the change camp who would agree to an Arab party joining their coalition is actually increasing. So as we get closer to election day people are coalescing around the idea that if need be, the change camp should recruit the Ra'am Party into their coalition. And I hope that at least if the change camp ends up with you know, 55, 56 seats, meaning they'd need the Ra'am Party to reach a 61 seat majority, public opinion would not be the reason why Gadi Eizenkot would not recruit the Ra'am Party

BRAUNOLD: So, I want to, before I go to audience questions, ask one more question that really comes from the news headlines over the past sort of forty-eight hours. We've seen reports in The New York Times and Axios and others of a potential restart of, you know, a major kinetic action vis-à-vis US-Israeli action towards Iran. And whereas a lot of commentary has been, will it happen before October 27th or after, before November 4th or after? As all of you know, the Israeli election takes place in stages, and even after election day, you'll have a three-week, four-week period where people are trying to cobble together a coalition.

Should there not be a clear outcome of the election, and there's arguments about a unity government or not, and at the same time the US and Israel decide to restart, or the Iranians attack, and that therefore leads to a, a restarting of, of kinetic action, what do you all as a panel think could happen vis-à-vis coalition negotiations?

There's been rumors of President Trump's preference of a unity government. It's been denied by some sections and ruled out by others. But what, what could you imagine being the scenario should there be a restarting of kinetic actions on potential sensitive coalition negotiations?

Jeremy, we'll start with you. We'll go to Dahlia, then Thair, and then we'll go to audience questions afterwards.

SALTAN: Sure. I remember how much of an impact it had back during 2021 with the formation of the government then. When you had the, the question, is there gonna be an operation in Gaza? Is there not? You, of course, had you had violence in a few of the mixed towns between Arabs and Israelis that are Jewish. I'll point out that Mansour Abbas played a very positive role there in terms of going ahead and doing a good job of keeping it down in terms of the flames, and that's nothing without Iran.

Iran obviously is a much bigger issue than Gaza when it comes to coalition negotiations. I think that that's something that will for sure play out, whether it actually happens or it doesn't happen. The question of if it does happen is something that's gonna be out there throughout the entire coalition process. What, what I can tell you is, is something that is also a fear of many parties, is also sitting as a member of the Central Elections Committee, is election day itself. Will there be something done to try to harm the election day or in the d- in the couple days afterwards, where we're still going ahead and counting the votes?

Our, our system's a little bit complicated since, you know, it's not digital or high tech of any kind. We're probably not gonna have pretty good results till, I would say, about 9:00 PM on Thursday. We have roughly about 650,000 votes estimated. That's about 12 of the 120 seats that are gonna be done in the last number of days, meaning they're only gonna start counting that after election day is actually over.

So, you know, there, there's a lot of fear of what happens on election day and on the days le- leading up to that when everyone's waiting to see what happens in terms of the votes playing out. But like I said, I'm looking at 2021. That was on a much smaller scale. If I'm looking at a much larger scale this is something that, that's gonna influence the negotiations, the talks, the also legitimacy of are you gonna wanna go ahead and talk or not talk with this party or not, or that party?

When you get up to those important points of going to the president and giving the recommendations, when you get to that point of having to vote confidence or no confidence for the Knesset itself, and it, it'll be interesting to see it unfold because it's definitely gonna be a lingering issue.

BRAUNOLD: Dahlia?

SCHEINDLIN: Well, let me start with the speculation that there might be some sort of kinetic action before October 27th, which is increasingly, you know, a concern among Israelis and Israeli observers, Israeli commentators, analysts. Excuse me. And I think that if, if it would, if it were to happen that there is some sort of escalation prior to the elections, I have very little doubt at that point.

We've seen some polling on this, but I'm putting the polls a little bit aside because I think that the situation is much more severe. Anybody supporting an opposition party, which again is the majority of Israelis, even if it's not a sweeping majority, would view an escalation with Iran right now as absolutely politically oriented you know, and politically tainted anybody supporting the government might think it's the right thing, but I think that it would lead to, you know, extremely bitter views.

And I, I wouldn't even put it past, you know, I wouldn't even rule out the idea that it could backfire on Netanyahu, especially if he really openly tries to postpone the elections for that reason. So maybe that's too extreme a scenario, but there is a lot of speculation and even preparation for that possibility in terms of looking at the legislative process that would be needed to postpone elections, and it's on people's minds.

So I, I mean, I really can't predict, but I'd like to think that that is a, you know, a less likely scenario, but it is certainly something that scares Israelis right now, certainly on the opposition side. And in terms of how it would have an impact after the election-- excuse me, I'm getting over a, you know, work-induced flu.

So I think that it's hard to say exactly. I mean, we, you know, Jeremy, it's a good comparison because in 2021, as the coalition negotiations were happening, we saw some, you know, an unprecedented outbreak of violence that was the beginning, or it was the operation known as as ... Shomrei Chamot. How do you say that in English? Guardian of the Walls. Operation with Gaza, which also included rioting between Jewish and Arab citizens in Israel, and it was really a very severe situation. Nevertheless, the change government was able to establish itself despite that, you know, the burden that it placed on that.

So I think that if there is really a full-blown war the way we had twice now in June and in February, June in '25 and February, March 2026, it could postpone things. But I don't, you know, once the election results are in, it's hard to say that it would clearly have an impact on the politics. And I just wanna make one more, you know, the politics of coalition building.

I wanna make one more point about a national unity government. It's also one of the scenarios that Israelis are discussing. We know that there's speculation about this. But I have, I have to say that I have a very hard time understanding how it could actually work in practice if you drill down to what it would mean.

Because at the political level, I can't see any situation in which Netanyahu would accept a, a, a unity government in which he is not prime minister first, and the opposition parties are unlikely to accept that. But, you know, even if he were to accept an idea where he goes second, which I think is extremely unlikely, he is legally barred from serving as a minister in that government because of his corruption trials by Supreme Court rulings, right?

This is not primary legislation in Israel, but Supreme Court, Court precedents for, you know, for 30 years have said that a person who is under indictment cannot serve as a regular minister. And so the idea that N- Netanyahu would take on a less than ministerial position in a, in a unity government seems, you know, completely antithetical, again, divorced from empirical reality as I read Mr. Netanyahu. And so I'm not really sure how that even works unless there is some very dramatic move towards a pardon of the prime minister, which that resides in the mind of one person only: the president of the country, for anybody who's not clear.

ABU RAS: Yeah, and real very quickly because I know we're running out of time here. But honestly, I believe that political polarization in Israel is so deep that both camps, if a war with Iran would happen and a war initiated by Israel, that it would just reinforce the positions of both camps. You know, the anti-Netanyahu camp or the change camp would see it as a political play here.

The pro-Netanyahu camp would see it as, you know, the prime minister doing what he does best as Mr. Security, which is defending Israel's national strategic interests. And no matter what Netanyahu does, everybody has already a pre-determined position on it. And, and a war with Iran would not change that. But no, I don't think necessarily it would change the dynamics of a post-election reality.

So, coalition talks will happen. Again, it, it largely depends on the results of, of the election. And unless we see something dramatic on the Iranian front, whether it's, I don't know the regime being toppled or something that is deeply in Israel's favor and is unex- accepted, I don't think it would, you know, positively help Netanyahu.

I would also point out that while there is a serious chance that a war would break out, I don't think it would happen before the midterm elections in the United States, and the results of the midterm election will also influence President Trump's decision of whether to, you know, commit to another round of, of action against Iran or not.

So there are a number of variables here that you need to take into consideration, and it's not just Netanyahu's decision.

BRAUNOLD: So gathering together the various different audience questions, it seems like the through line of action is really how could this election, one way or the other, impact Israeli-Palestinian relations and, in turn, Israel's challenges in its international standings.

With that being the theme, I'll let each of the panelists work that theme into their closing remarks as that seems to be the major topic of interest from coming from the audience. So we'll go in reverse order. So we'll start with you, Jeremy. We'll go to Thair, and then we'll go to Dahlia to close up. Jeremy?

SALTAN: Yeah. I don't see the election results producing much of a change within the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Obviously, it's something that was there before. It's gonna be there after. I don't think we're gonna see much going there in terms of the standing of Israel after the election.

That's an issue. Israeli politicians at some times seem to not understand that that is something that impacts the standing. And I think that regardless of what happens in the midterms or what happens in the presidential elections in the United States in two years, or what happens in Europe and elsewhere, that it's, it's gonna be very interesting to see how that issue goes ahead and moves forward in the future.

BRAUNOLD: Thanks. Thair?

ABU RAS: Yeah, I mean tactically speaking there won't be a big difference. I think if Eisenkot is elected Prime Minister, he will continue, you know, this aggressive approach that the Israelis have adopted after October 7th. He'll probably even want to prove himself and prove his credentials that he too can, quote unquote, "Not take the inter- international community into consideration," that he can be tough and an iron fist and, you know, whatever terms you wanna use here.

So immediately I don't think we would see a change, but strategically we might see a change in the way Israel behaves diplomatically and politically. So I would argue that an Eisenkot coalition might make it easier for Israel to implement President Trump's 20-point plan, or the kind of frustrations that the Americans are having with the Israelis vis-à-vis Lebanon and, you know, the Netanyahu's government's unwillingness to strengthen the Lebanese government, whether it's politically or through other means.

Maybe the Eisenkot coalition would be more willing to do so, because one of Netanyahu's biggest weaknesses is that he might have, you know, some military successes, but he's not been successful at translating those military accomplishments into a political solution. This has been Netanyahu's weakness historically.

He's always been a, a person that's good with tactics, but horrible when it comes to strategy and, you know, ending things with Israel being able to have the upper hand instead of extending the conflict till forever, basically. So, so while in the immediate future I don't see a big change, maybe strategically it will, but more importantly than that, I think what Eisenkot would do is he would, the Eisenkot coalition would allow Israel some breathing space diplomatically, at least for a few months or maybe even a few years.

It will allow Israel to project a more, you wanna call it liberal, more humane face. You can use whatever term you want here. It would be good for the Chuck Schumers of the world who want to defend Israel but are having a very hard time doing so with someone like Netanyahu. But if the Eisenkot government does continue the Netanyahu policies after a year or two rec- there will need to be some reckoning amongst Israel's allies in the West about basically the problem is Israel and not necessarily Benjamin Netanyahu.

BRAUNOLD: And finally, Dahlia.

SCHEINDLIN: Thanks. I think that there are a couple of areas of what I would call low-hanging fruit for an opposition government if it does come to pass. One is I think that they would right away work to crack down on, on Israeli terror. I call it Israeli-backed terror. We've gone back and forth about what we should call Jewish terror or settler terror, but I think it's Israeli-backed terror, and I think that there would be a strong incentive for the government to crack down on it.

There would be sufficient public support for it, and I think it would go a long way towards a first step for that government trying to portray that it's different from a Netanyahu government. I think another area of low-hanging fruit, so to speak, would be to work to try to reestablish some of the programs that were put into place to curtail organized crime in the Arab or Palestinian citizen community of Israel during the change government, which was beginning already to bear fruit.

We already saw a decline in the number of homicides at that time, and I think that that would be something that also should have, you know, would have widespread public support. It is not controversial in Israel, and it would also be a way of declaring a very clear contrast with the current government, which has done as much as possible to neglect the issue and let organized crime fester, and it's a real scourge on Israeli society, all of Israeli society.

I do think that the kind of visible difference we'll see, as I've argued in the beginning, is that this government actually holds an ideology of expansionism and annexation of all of those

areas. And I think an Eisenkot government is not gonna transform Israeli-Palestinian relations, but it does not actively seek for ideological reasons to establish full sovereignty over the West Bank and Gaza, which is a difference.

But I think the danger there is that it goes back to the conflict management paradigm, you know, of saying, "Well, we'll certainly cultivate settlements in Area C because we're committed to that ideologically," but just let things go on as they are and hope for the best, and maybe the world will take their eyes off of Israel in the meantime, which I think is dangerous because it puts back into place some of the conditions that led us to inevitable escalation.

And in that sense, if that's the case, it's not gonna go very-- I don't think it's gonna do sufficient work to transform relations with the US. I mean, certainly given where the Democratic Party is going, the change will, the need you know, Israel would need to change much more significantly towards accepting Palestinian self-determination as a very fundamental condition for any sort of revival with the Democratic Party.

That doesn't have to mean, you know, hands off Palestine tomorrow and full withdrawal the next day, but it does need to mean basic accept- basically accepting that principle and working towards it in a meaningful way. I don't think you're gonna have any sort of revival with the Democratic Party, and frankly, you know, we've seen a lot of internal divisions in the Republican Party about what, you know, whether Israel's you know, aggressive posture in the Middle East is sustainable.

And so, you know, I, I would say that an Eisenkot government, if it, if it exists, would have to really come up with some firm policy vision which it does not currently have, in order to revive relations with the US and change the direction of Israel as well.

BRAUNOLD: That was very comprehensive from all three of you in your closing remarks.

I think it would be fair to summarize that a change coalition will know what it is against, but the ability to say what it is for is still an open question, and a need to be able to develop that is one that is more than just one of political elites. But I think that, as all of you have indicated, really goes down to the substance of where Israel is today and, and the lack of a positive vision of what that means vis-à-vis Israelis and the Palestinians in the shadow of October 7th.

With that I wanna thank our panelists Dahlia, Jeremy, and Thair for joining us today, and thank the Brookings Institution for hosting us today. We hope that you found this useful and informative, and as Jeremy said it might be until Thursday at 9:00 PM Jerusalem time when we have some real election results.

But hopefully it will be interesting, informative and that this was a useful guide for you as you start trying to interpret those. Thank you for joining us this morning.