

March 2019 Culture Connection

The Layers of the General Elections

By Robbie Gringras

It feels wrong to elide politics with culture. When visiting Israel once, the British author Ian McEwan pointed out that “it is a bad sign when politics permeates every corner of life”. He was right, of course, but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t try to understand these “bad signs”. Politics in Israel really does permeate every corner of life, so it seems amiss to avoid looking at its biggest cultural “permeation” – the General Elections.

Here is the main takeaway of this (fairly long) piece:

Israel’s Elections are nowhere near as complicated as people would have you believe.



Think of a woven piece of cloth. As a finished product, it looks opaque and complex. But the cloth is just a combination of layers. Several simple layers, laid or woven one on top of the other.

That’s what the Israeli elections are – a combination of simple layers. Like looking at a full weave of a carpet, we just need to unpick the overlapping colors and layers.

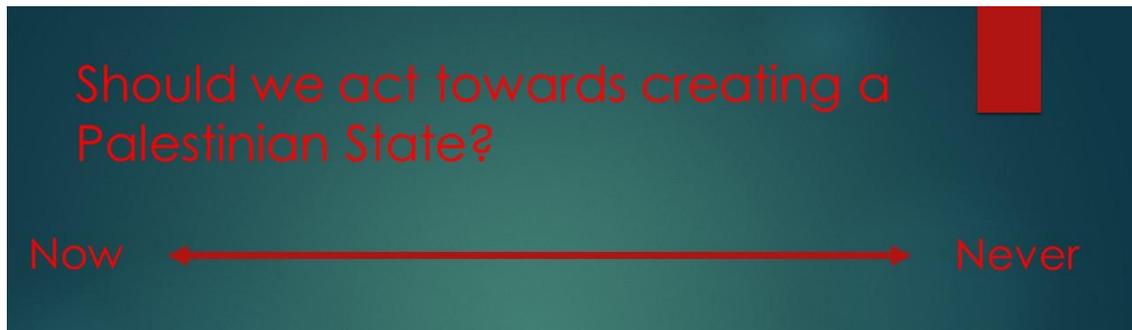
- [Here I will describe the three main layers.](#)
- [I will describe a layer that is unique to these elections.](#)
- [I will lay out two practical upshots of this Israeli electoral weave.](#)

Layer One - The Key Issues

The past two elections have swung around 3 key issues, which are best understood in the form of three sliding scales.

The first issue is about the establishment of a Palestinian State.

The sliding scale runs from a Palestinian State Now, to a Palestinian State Never! I think it would be fair to say that according to current polling, some 75% of votes would go to parties situated over to the right-hand side of this scale. Three parties indeed declare that there should never be such a State (Union of the Right, New Right, Zehut) – and there others who kind of agree but don't say it outright. As we mentioned in a previous post, when Israelis label someone or something Left or Right, they are only referring to this one issue.



The second issue is about the economy.

Back in the summer of 2011 a revolution very nearly took place. Some 7% of the Israeli population was out on the streets in their version of Occupy Wall Street. Think about that – 7% of the whole population! 7% of the population of the USA would mean 26 million Americans demonstrating against an exploitative capitalist system... Some said Israelis were demonstrating against a situation they'd been singing about for decades. ([Click here for the Social Justice Protests Playlist!](#))

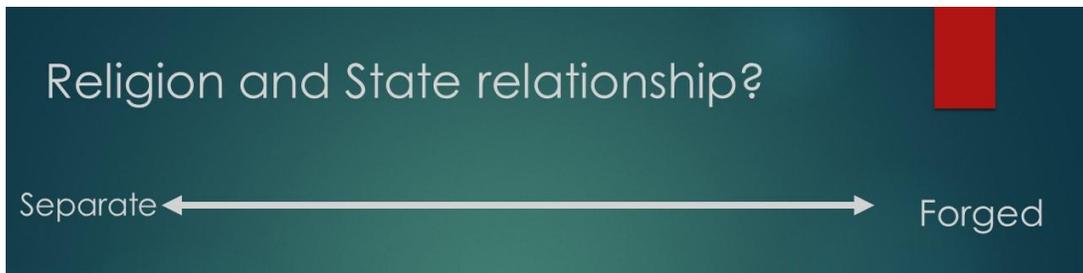
I personally find it really difficult to point to significant policy successes of this movement. However it did spawn a couple of new political parties, introduced some outspoken politicians fighting hard for these issues, and most importantly it shifted the discourse. When Israelis talk of "*chevrati* - חברתי" issues, they mean push for more social solidarity in economic policy. On this scale the parties spread fairly broadly between a redistributionist welfare state and a libertarian capitalist heaven:



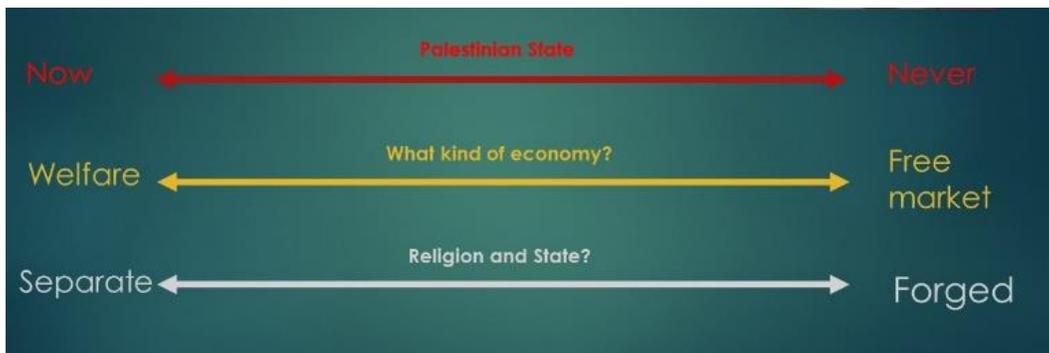
Towards the left of this yellow line you'll find interesting clusters. For example, Hadash, the Arab-Jewish Communist party, would be found on the far left hanging out with the Shas Haredi Sephardi party...

The third issue is about religion and state.

Its extremes call for either a total separation between religion and state, or a full merger between state powers and orthodox Jewish law. This, for example, is where the communists and the Haredim part company!



So this is the first layer of the Israeli elections: The spread of perceived policies.



Layer two – all you need is a simple majority

Just as in the States' Senate and House of Representatives, the majority rules.

There are 120 Members of Knesset, so 61 seats win you the majority. The key difference between the Israeli system and the US system is no party in Israel has ever managed to win an outright majority of seats, so they always need to build a coalition with a few others.

But when you think about it, that's exactly what happens in the US – **the Democratic Party and the Republican Party are really two large coalitions**. The Democrats are a coalition of the AOC Party, the Clinton Party, the Biden Party, and several in between. The Republicans include the Tea Party, the Romney Party, the Trump Party... In the States you call them two parties, but really they are two large coalitions.

The only difference between the American coalitions and the Israeli coalitions is that the **Israeli coalitions are formed after the voting is over, whereas the American "coalitions" are formed into two parties before the voting begins**.

Layer three – Coalition = common ground + **compromise**

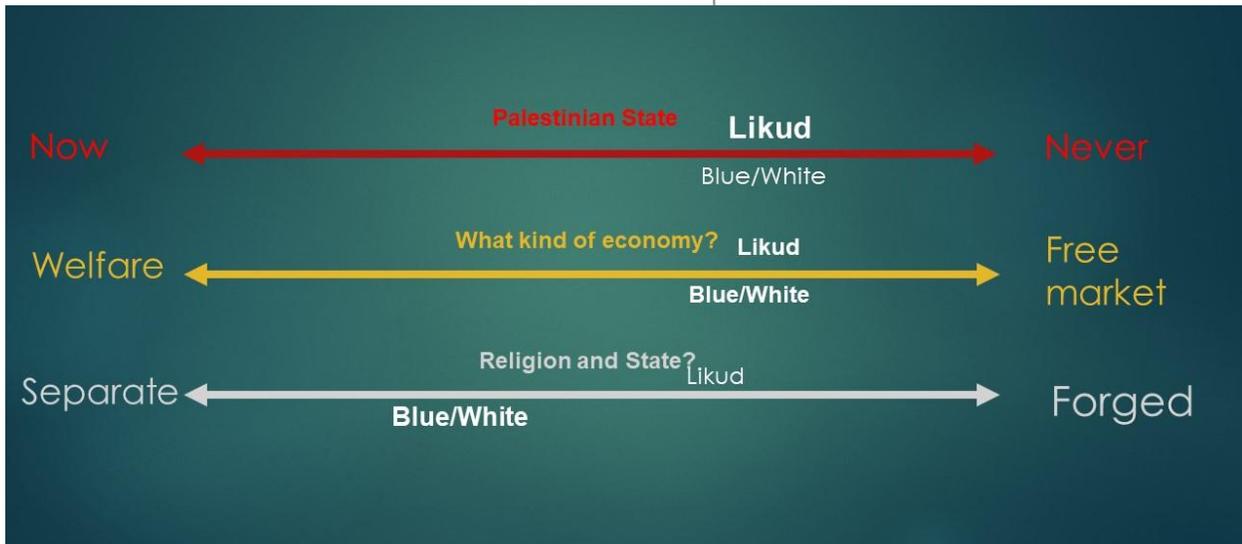
So the results are in. Let's say I'm the leader of the biggest party – I've won more seats than anyone else, but I need to team up with others so that I can have a coalition of the majority. The moment I build my majority coalition, I get to be Prime Minister.

How do I build my coalition?

I first look to the parties with which I have the most in common. **But I also check with whom I can compromise, and who can compromise with me.**

Check out this comparison between the two largest parties according to the polls: Likud and Blue-White:

[Before you read on, please note that the following summations of the parties' stances are my estimate alone. Others will give you different estimates. That's fine – I'm only including my estimates to clarify the point about the nature of coalitions.]



On the red line, about a Palestinian state, I have to admit that I find it pretty difficult to discern a great difference between the two. The leader of the Likud party has spoken publicly about a Two State Solution, while the number three of the Blue-White Party has come out firmly in the “Never” camp. Both parties are somewhere over to the right.

On social-economic policies, likewise. The parties’ rhetoric differs, but my Marxist friends would argue that the substance doesn’t seem to.

So far, so good. Common ground. A coalition in the making?

Not so fast. The two parties clearly differ on the white line, about religion and state. Yair Lapid, the number two of Blue-White, has a record of fighting vehemently against Haredi political interests, while Likud have seen Haredim as their natural allies.

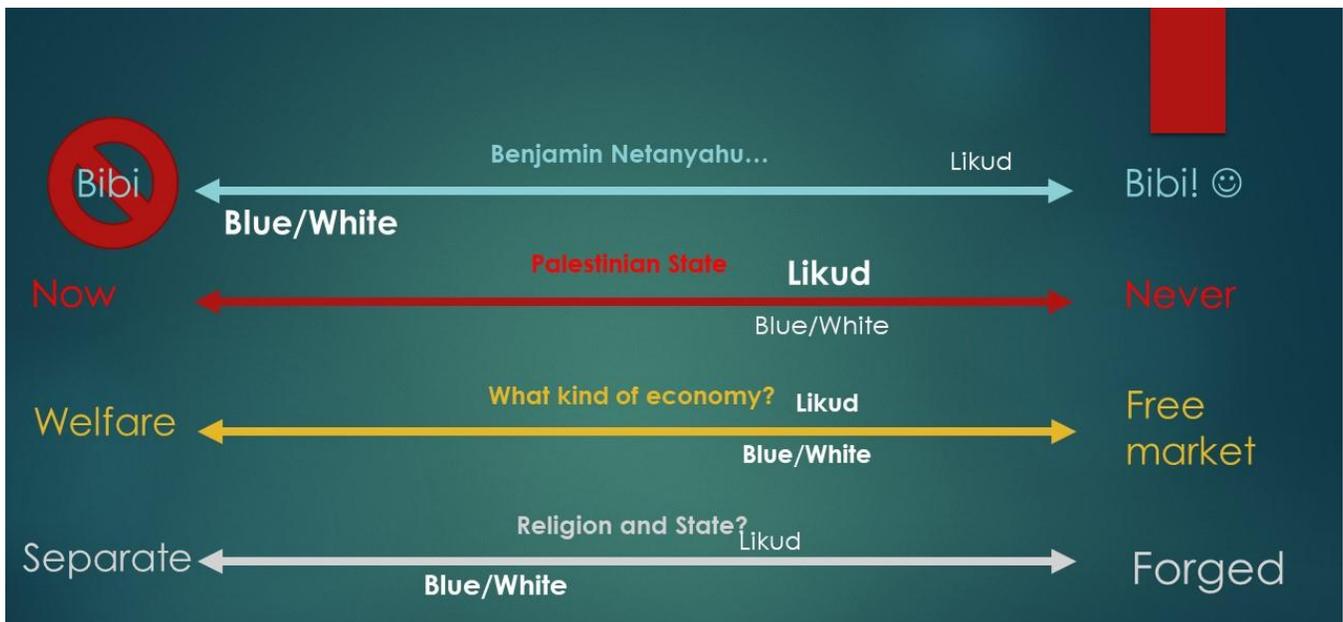
Looking solely at common ground, Likud and Blue-White cannot form a coalition, seeing as they only share two out of three issues.

This is where only looking at “issues” and “common ground” is not enough. **We also need to look at where the parties are willing to compromise.** A party’s stance is not only configured according to what they believe in, but also on what they are not willing to budge. As the Israeli philosopher Avishai Margalit points out, “Ideals may tell us something important about what we would like to be, but compromises tell us who we are.” ([See this short video](#))

Apropos - my gut says that the Likud party does not hold a principled stance in favor of Haredim – theirs is a marriage of convenience. Hence I’ve put “Likud” in a small font on the religion/state scale, while for Blue-White it’s in bold and larger. Likud may have a tendency on this scale, but don’t have a firm stand – they can compromise and meet Blue-White half-way.

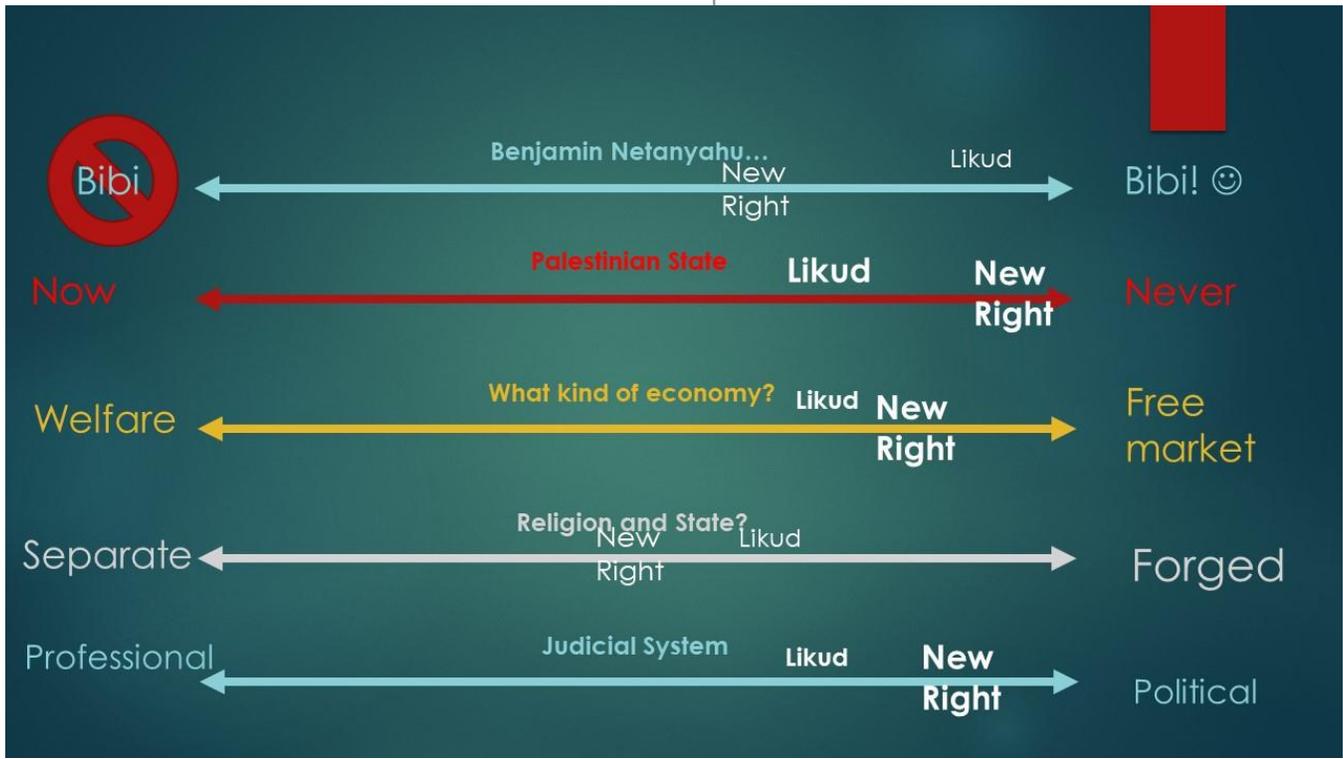
What is unique this time around? There are two new issues!

I've added another scale to the top of the diagram:



Due to Benjamin Netanyahu's longevity, his experience, his alleged corruption, and more – **Bibi Netanyahu is now an electoral Issue**. The Blue-White party, set up by former Chief of Staff Benny Gantz, and strengthened in its merging with the Yesh Atid party of Yair Lapid – this party was established in order to get rid of Bibi. Replacing Bibi is their unshakeable promise to the electorate – it's not up for compromise. This means that as long as Netanyahu remains leader of the Likud party, there is no possibility of a coalition between Likud and Blue-White.

A **second issue** that has arisen of late – not necessarily relevant to the Likud/Blue-White conversation – is about **the nature of the judicial system in Israel**. Currently the appointment of judges is mostly beyond the reach of politicians. Supporters of this system would argue that this means they can be independent, objective, and far-sighted. Critics argue that it also means they have become an independent elite that is unrepresentative of and detached from the Israeli public – a public that has become far more religious and conservative in the past few decades.



This move to politicize the Judiciary (some may call say it is to “Americanize” it!) is a key project of the New Right party, headed up by Naftali Bennet and Ayelet Shaked. [In Shaked’s striking election broadcast](#), she points out that opponents complain her move smacks of fascism, while she maintains it smells of democracy...

As you can see, New Right are much easier partners for Likud, since they mostly share common ground, and mostly stand firm where the other can compromise. Their only clash is their stance on the Palestinians, which has been evident throughout their time in government and during the elections now. New Right urge a far more strident approach to the Palestinians.

Upshot one – the advantages and the disadvantages of being a one-issue party

Let's take one party as an example this time round. Geshet is a party that takes a stand only on one issue: citizens' welfare. Its charismatic and highly-esteemed leader, Orly Levy-Abecassis has avoided giving her opinion on any other issue. She will not be drawn on the Palestinian conflict, matters of religion, nor on Bibi nor the Judicial system. On entering any coalition she has one demand: To be made the Health Minister and to be given a budget to revive Israel's ailing hospitals. This makes Geshet a very easy party to include in a coalition: So long as I give her a budget and control over health, I can do whatever I want on all the other issues I care more about!

The downside? Many voters wish to influence more than the health system, and so are drawn to other parties with wider stances. In order to enter the Knesset, Geshet must receive at least 3.25% of the votes – around 150,000 votes - and it might not make that threshold. Orly Levy-Abecassis stands to be either the Minister of Health – or unemployed...

Upshot two – the dilemma of the voters!

Pity the Israeli voter!

- “ I am a socialist peacenik. I stand to the left of Blue-White on nearly all their policies. But we must get rid of Bibi, and only Blue-White can do that. Should I throw away my principles to get rid of the Unprincipled One?
- “ I want cannabis to be legalized. The only politician I trust on this issue, is Moshe Feiglin. He will get the job done. But I keep being told that he totally denies the rights of Palestinians – they'll never get a State if he has his way. But hey – the Right is going to win anyway – how am I going to cope with that without a legal high?
- “ I am a religious settler. I believe that Israel should embody Orthodox Judaism in the Land of Israel. I live in Judea because it is the Land given to us by the Lord. I try hard to reach out to my Palestinian neighbors whenever I can. I do not hate Palestinians. I am no racist. I find the rhetoric and actions of the Otzma Yehudit party to be abominable. But the right-wing religious party I have voted for all my life has now merged with these racists. Now what?