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# Israeli Legislative Election 2020 – A Viewpoint from Pakistan

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## Key Points:

- In March 2020, members of the Israeli parliament will hold their unprecedented third election in a year.
- From the Pakistani perspective, Netanyahu can be single-handedly credited for catapulting Israel's relations with India to new heights.
- From Pakistan's geostrategic perspective, Blue and White's victory in the March 2020 election could give way to some level of reduction in Israel's extraordinary role in the South Asian stability paradigm.

**O**n 2 March 2020, members of the Israeli parliament (Knesset) will hold their unprecedented third election in a year. This development comes in the wake of unsuccessful attempts to form a coalition government post the April 2019 and September 2019 elections.

Incumbent Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his primary contender Benjamin "Benny" Gantz, a former Israel Defence Forces (IDF) Lieutenant General, were unable to gather sizable votes to form their independent government. Moreover, they were also unable to reach a consensus on how to form a national unity government (similar to Afghanistan). Although Gantz' Blue and White alliance being the frontrunner with 33 seats, succeeds the ruling Likud by only one seat. On account of his strong views against corruption, Gantz has, so far, refused to accept a political compromise with Netanyahu.

There are 120 seats in the Knesset. Each of the contesting political parties needs at least 61 seats to form an independent government. It is interesting to note that the third leading political alliance in the Knesset is the Joint List, a coalition of majority-Arab parliamentarians (MKs) belonging to Balad, Ta'al, Hadash and the United Arab List. During the September 2019 election, the Joint List expressed its support for Gantz not in endorsement of his policies but for his potential to de-seat Netanyahu.<sup>1</sup>

Facing electoral defeat twice did not disrupt Netanyahu's ambitions. By the end of December 2019, he was able to gain more than 71 per cent of votes during internal party election, against his long-time nemesis Gideon Saar.<sup>2</sup> However, he was recently indicted by the Israeli Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit for charges of

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<sup>1</sup> "Arab parties endorse Gantz, break tradition to remove Netanyahu," *Al Jazeera*, last modified September 23, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/09/arab-parties-endorse-gantz-breaking-tradition-oust-netanyahu-190922171331651.html>.

<sup>2</sup> "Josie Ensor," *The Telegraph*, last modified December 26, 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/12/26/netanyahu-faces-likud-party-leadership-challenge-poor-election/>.

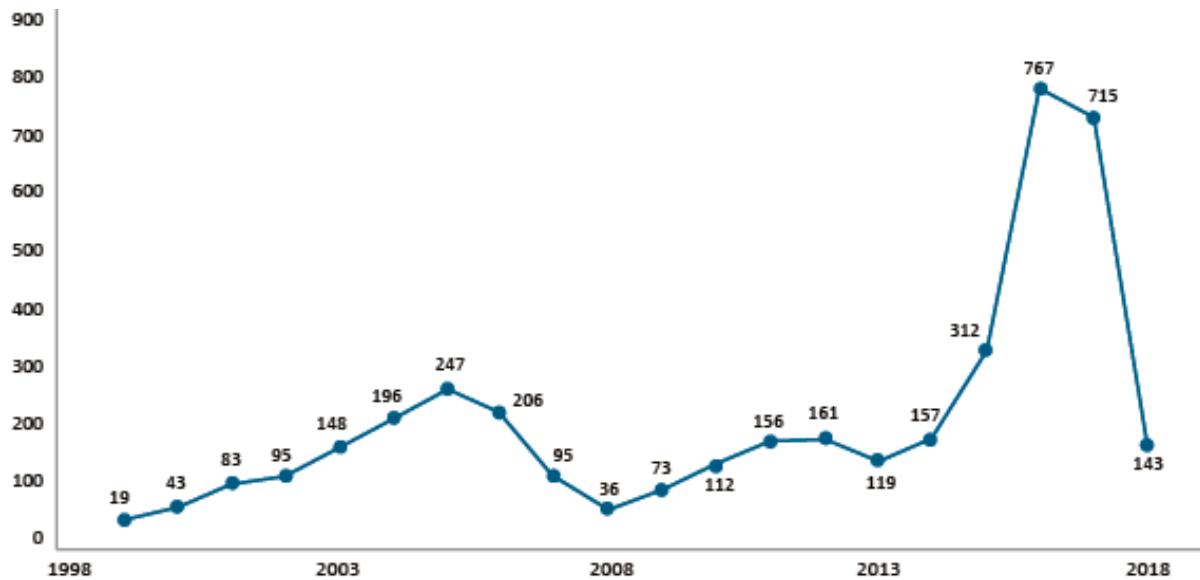


Figure 1 - Value of Israeli Arms Exports to India (1999-2018) in US \$ million  
Source: (SIPRI Arms Transfer Database)

bribery, fraud and breach of trust.<sup>3</sup> These charges are not new. In fact, Netanyahu was accused of similar offences during his first term in office (1996 to 1999) by the Israeli Police, but insufficient evidence at the time helped him escape prosecution.<sup>4 5</sup>

## Netanyahu's Legacy

Benjamin Netanyahu holds the distinction of being the longest-reigning Prime Minister of Israel. Since entering politics in 1988, he has held numerous portfolios for the Likud party including two terms as Prime Minister (1996-1999 and 2009 to present).

His overall politics can be described as 'defiant' and his extensive foreign policy experience imparts to him the skills needed to squeeze his way out of external as well as domestic scandals. From the botched assassination of Hamas leader Khaled Mashal in Jordan to the unsuccessful efforts to extradite the spy Jonathan Pollard from US custody, shoring up international aggression against Iran's nuclear programme, and resisting corruption probes in his own homeland, Netanyahu has come a long way defying the odds. Indeed, for any and all disagreements, one may be against his brand of politics, it is firm defiance which prevents Netanyahu's vote bank from diminishing rapidly.

From the Pakistani perspective, Netanyahu can be single-

handedly credited for catapulting Israel's relations with India to new heights. Although fellow Likud member Ariel Sharon was the first Israeli Prime Minister to visit India, it was Netanyahu who welcomed the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) victory in May 2014 and personally congratulated Narendra Modi.

During his 2017 visit to Israel, Modi and Netanyahu upgraded bilateral ties to the level of a 'strategic partnership', which the latter described as "a marriage made in heaven".<sup>6</sup> For Pakistan, Israel's growing defence and security relations with India are a cause of concern since the capabilities of Israeli technologies are well-known the world over. Since the start of Netanyahu's second term in office as Prime Minister, arms and equipment exports to India grew steadily till 2017. However, an initial decline was expected in 2013, but when Modi assumed office in 2014 to embark on his first term, the exports exponentially grew before experiencing another decline in 2018.

On an average, Israel sells military hardware worth \$1 billion to India each year. Israeli defence companies account for almost half the India's offset deals (Indian tri-services). It was reported that Israel's 'Spice 2000' missiles were employed by the Indian Air Force to strike inside Pakistani territory during the February 2019 standoff.<sup>7</sup>

Netanyahu's hawkish policies on Iran have generated sectarian fissures across Pakistan which are exploited by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' Quds Force

<sup>3</sup> "Full text: AG's announcement of decision to indict Prime Minister Netanyahu," *The Times of Israel*, last modified November 22, 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/full-text-ag-s-announcement-of-decision-to-indict-prime-minister-netanyahu/>.

<sup>4</sup> Tracy Wilkinson, "Israeli Police Want Netanyahu, Wife Indicted Over Handling of State Gifts," *Los Angeles Times*, last modified March 29, 2000, <http://articles.latimes.com/2000/mar/29/news/mn-13783>.

<sup>5</sup> "Netanyahu Corruption Charges Dropped," CBS News, last modified September 27, 2000, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2000/09/27/world/main236708.shtml>.

<sup>6</sup> Indrani Bagchi, "India, Israel elevate their ties to strategic partnership," *Times of India*, last modified July 6, 2017, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-israel-elevate-their-ties-to-strategic-partnership/articleshow/59461930.cms>.

<sup>7</sup> Grace Wermenbol, "A passage to India: Israel's pivot East," *Atlantic Council*, last modified July 24, 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/a-passage-to-india-israel-s-pivot-east/>.

(IRGC-QF) on the one hand and countered by an Arab-sponsored offensive on the other.

national leadership is “rational”.<sup>10</sup>

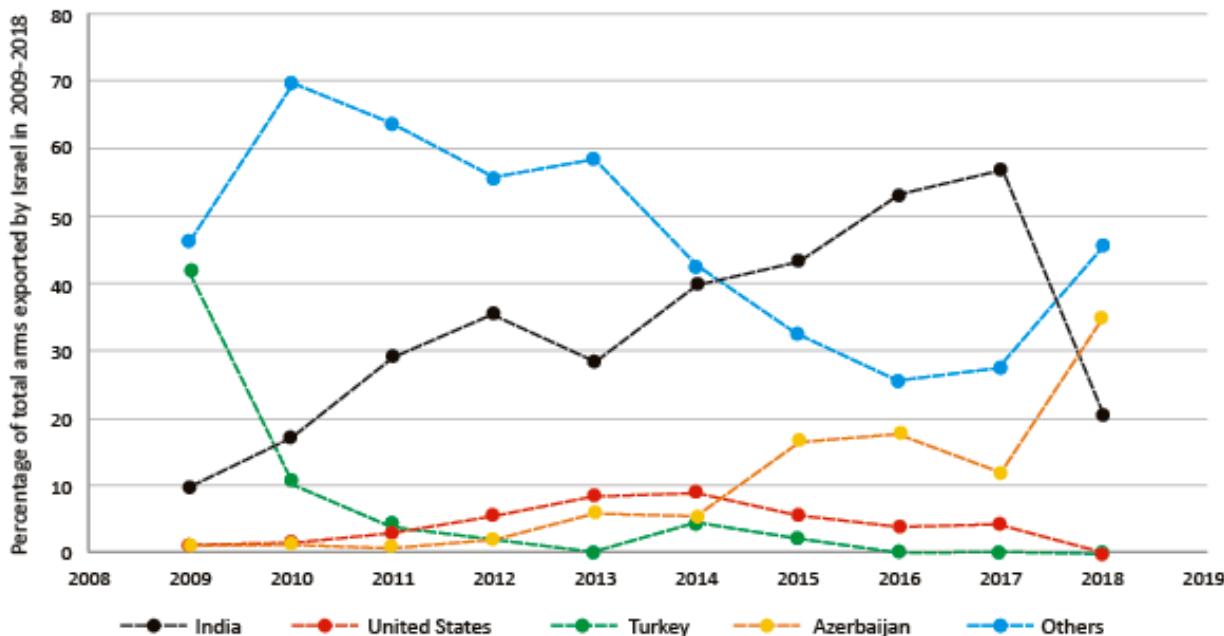


Figure 2 - Country-wise arms exports of Israel (2009-2018), in percentage  
(Source: SIPRI Arms Transfer Database)

## Gantz' Entry

The rapid rise of Benny Gantz' political popularity is propelled by his past military career. Gantz served as Commander of the IDF's liaison unit in Lebanon and oversaw the withdrawal against Hezbollah in 1999. He was personally responsible for shutting the gate between both countries after the rather humiliating defeat at the hands of irregular militias trained by Iran. The following year, he was appointed the Commander of the Judea and Samaria Division which oversaw IDF forces in the West Bank during the outbreak of the Second Intifada. From here, two years later, Gantz led the prestigious Northern Command and was deputed to the United States as a military attaché, giving him exposure to the workings of Washington.<sup>8</sup>

When he was IDF chief, Gantz did not shy from expressing his difference of opinion with his political bosses. He acknowledged Iran's ambitions to accelerate its nuclear programme and was also involved in seizing a massive Iranian arms shipment reportedly destined for Gaza<sup>9</sup>, but cautioned against 'hysteria' and 'careless decisions', without directly naming Prime Minister Netanyahu (these are some of the statements he reiterates even today). For all its rhetoric, Gantz believes the Iranian

Israel Resilience Party, which Gantz founded, was subsumed into the radically-centrist Yesh Atid party to form the 'Blue and White' alliance after colours of the Israeli flag. Their policy calls for international collaboration on security (rather than Netanyahu's more *inside-out* aggressive approach) and recognising Israeli Arabs as equal citizens.<sup>11</sup> These beliefs are at the heart of Gantz' repeated assertions that Likud and particularly Netanyahu have focused too much on the external (foreign policy) front at the cost of internal harmony, creating what he believes is a 'deeply polarised' Israeli society.

Policies regarding Security and Diplomacy in Blue and White's political manifesto advocates an Israeli-led security bloc in the Middle East involving liaison with like-minded Arab countries.<sup>12</sup> It is Iran-centric but measured enough to place equal emphasis on diplomacy alongside capabilities build-up of the IDF. The foremost agenda for Blue and White is to curb the spread of terrorism and extremism from "*Morocco to the Persian Gulf, from Riyadh to Cairo and Amman*" through partnership, not coercion. Indeed, in Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, an Israel led by Blue and White can expect to find willing partners.

<sup>8</sup>“Benny Gantz Takes Over as IDF Chief: I Am Ready to Face the Challenges,” *Haaretz*, last modified February 14, 2011, <https://www.haaretz.com/1.5122287>.

<sup>9</sup>Yoav Zitun, “IDF combat engineering unit, Navy fighters unload Iranian weapons ship,” *Ynetnews*, last modified August 3, 2014, <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4496466,00.html>.

<sup>10</sup>Julian Borger, “Israel army chief contradicts Netanyahu on Iran,” *The Guardian*, last modified April 25, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/julian-borger-global-security-blog/2012/apr/25/israel-iran>.

<sup>11</sup>“A beginner’s guide to the 2019 Israeli elections,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, last modified March 13, 2019, <https://www.jta.org/2019/03/13/israel/a-beginners-guide-to-the-2019-israeli-elections>.

<sup>12</sup>“Platform”, Kachollavan, accessed February 29, 2020, <https://kachollavan.org.il/english/>.

In case of a decisive victory for Blue and White in March 2020, the reported arrangement is that Gantz will serve for two years as Prime Minister, whereas Yesh Atid founder and Blue and White coalition partner Yair Lapid will serve as the Foreign Minister.<sup>13</sup> After two years, Lapid would become the premier and appoint Gantz as the Defence Minister.

While the Blue and White alliance's primary focus is on domestic reforms, it has ensured that experienced and relatively pragmatic hands are retained in matters involving Security and Diplomacy. Besides Gantz, there are three other former IDF candidates:

- Lieutenant General (Retired) Moshe Ya'alon, former Defence Minister in Netanyahu's second term (resigned over differences) and a Military Intelligence chief,
- Lieutenant General (Retired) Gabriel "Gabi" Ashkenazi, former Chief of General Staff, and
- Major General (Retired) Orna Barbivai, the first female officer to reach the rank.

In his January 2020 meeting with the US President Donald Trump, Gantz hailed his Middle East 'Peace Plan' and vowed to implement it after electoral victory with other regional countries, but asked Trump to hold the process until the election formally concludes. Reportedly, Gantz and Trump discussed the plan with other stakeholders including the King of Jordan<sup>14</sup>.

The Arab League and Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) have rejected Trump's plan.<sup>15 16</sup> One of the main concerns is that, if implemented, Israeli Arabs would be stripped of their citizenship.<sup>17</sup> thereby weakening Blue and White's chances of forming a national unity government with the Joint List, an opportunity which the Likud would seize to exploit.

It is unclear if Gantz has worked out a proper campaign strategy. As per recent surveys, Likud/Netanyahu are

<sup>13</sup> Gil Hoffman, "Gantz and Lapid's 'Blue and White' reveals list, only 2 women in top 10," *The Jerusalem Post*, last modified February 21, 2019, <https://www.jpost.com/Breaking-News/Gantz-Lapid-agree-to-run-together-581301>.

<sup>14</sup> Raphael Ahren, "Gantz hails Trump's peace plan, says he'll work to implement it after elections," *The Times of Israel*, last modified January 27, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/gantz-hails-trumps-peace-plan-but-tells-him-it-should-wait-for-after-election/>.

<sup>15</sup> "Arab League rejects Trump's Middle East plan," *Al Jazeera*, last modified February 1, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/02/arab-league-holds-emergency-meeting-trump-plan-200201105251740.html>.

<sup>16</sup> "Organisation of Islamic Cooperation rejects Trump peace plan," *Al Jazeera*, last modified February 3, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/02/oic-holds-emergency-meeting-trump-middle-east-plan-200203064919675.html>.

<sup>17</sup> "Buried in Trump's peace plan, a proposal that could strip thousands of Israeli Arabs of their citizenship," *Washington Post*, last modified February 8, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/buried-in-trumps-peace-plan-a-proposal-that-could-strip-thousands-of-israeli-arabs-of-their-citizenship/2020/02/07/0b43ff0c-4696-11ea-91ab-ce439aa5c7c1\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/buried-in-trumps-peace-plan-a-proposal-that-could-strip-thousands-of-israeli-arabs-of-their-citizenship/2020/02/07/0b43ff0c-4696-11ea-91ab-ce439aa5c7c1_story.html).

leading the voter confidence polls since Blue and White have apparently began approaching left-wing parties for an alliance, in contravention of its previously stated policy.<sup>18</sup>

Irrespective of who wins the upcoming election, the next Israeli government will remain fixated on Iran and encourage like-minded Arab states to implement the controversial Trump peace plan which favours Israel's establishment more than it favours the ordinary citizens of Palestine. Moreover, the exclusion of a non-Arab and majoritarian Sunni Muslim country like Turkey from Middle East peace efforts sends dangerous signals and has the potential to escalate geopolitical tussles in Pakistan's neighbourhood.

A Gantz-led Blue and White regime may prove more agile and pragmatic on the regional security and foreign policy front than Likud, but could ignite differences within the Sunni world, let alone their spat with Shiite-majority Iran. And if Netanyahu manages to surprise everyone with another victory, his belligerence will grow further, thereby further complementing India's efforts for military and intelligence modernisation, to Pakistan's disadvantage.

Blue and White's stated foreign policy has at large, focused on the Middle East without aspiring for specific relations with extra-regional allies like India, with whom Likud maintained exceptional relations.

From Pakistan's geostrategic perspective, therefore, Blue and White's victory in the March 2020 election could give way to some level of reduction in Israel's extraordinary role in the South Asian stability paradigm.

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Lis, "Bleeding Seats, Gantz Changes His Strategy Days Before Israeli Election," *Haaretz*, last modified February 27, 2020, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/elections/.premium-bleeding-seats-gantz-changes-his-strategy-days-before-israeli-election-1.8591302>.