

Prime Minister Netanyahu has stood head and shoulders above his political opponents for the past decade because he has managed to convince the electorate of two factors.

Firstly that in effect he is Israel's 'security guard' and secondly that notwithstanding any of his flaws, no-one else is really up to the task.

The coming election is once again, not about policies but about who is suitable to lead.

Three elements as the situation sits currently, will determine what sort of government Israel will see after the April 9th elections – and just how soon Israel will go to elections again:

- Can the generals – Gantz, Ya'alon and potentially Gabi Ashkenazi (all ex Chiefs of the IDF) lead a unified block which will include Yair Lapid and his party? This would mean Lapid allowing Gantz to head such a block - something he has so far strongly resisted.
- If as seems likely, Attorney General Mandelblit indicts Netanyahu pending a hearing, will Netanyahu who still leads well in the polls and if nothing changes, be able to find enough coalition partners to form a government?
- If the results are close enough, what will the President of Israel do? He has tremendous power in determining who he will firstly invite to form a government – which gives that person the best chance of bringing a coalition together. Some conventions exist, but he is not bound to invite the largest party to form government.

And rumours abound that President Rivlin may even decide to invite someone like Gidon Sa'ar who did very well in the Likud primaries, to form government if the President felt he could not invite a person under indictment to be Prime Minister. This seems like being way out of left field at the moment, but who knows what the mood will be like after Mandelblit acts.

Gantz has now spoken a little more – but one can infer almost any policy direction from his utterances to date.

Rather than policies, his aim is to be a credible and viable personal alternative to Netanyahu, presenting himself as someone who

understands and can deliver security being an ex-head of the IDF, as well as being free from the taint of corruption - a cleanskin.

Security, as usual, is the main question with Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas being the major concerns.

Gantz is careful to give some praise to Netanyahu and mimics Netanyahu when saying about the Palestinians that *"We are not looking to control anyone else."*

About the Gaza Disengagement in 2005 Gantz said: *"The Disengagement was carried out with a lot of political consideration. All sides had a lot at stake and the state managed to do it without tearing the country apart. It was done legally, carried out by the State of Israel and the IDF, and even though it was very painful for the settlers, it was handled well."*

Gantz pointed out that it was Prime Minister Sharon from the right, supported three times in Knesset and Cabinet votes by Netanyahu that actually enabled the Disengagement to be carried out.

He seemed to imply a policy when he said: *"We must take the lessons of the Disengagement and implement them in other arenas."*

But then 'qualified' himself by saying that under his watch *"There will be no unilateral actions related to the evacuation of settlements."*

Gantz spoke about peace with the Palestinians as a goal, but only as a future distant hope and strongly talked about retaining all of the settlement blocks.

"We will fortify Israel's position as a democratic state, strengthen the settlement blocs and Golan, where we won't leave ever. The Jordan Valley will be our border, but we won't let millions of Palestinians living beyond the fence to endanger our identity as a Jewish state," he said.

What Gantz did not say was how he was going to achieve these seemingly contradictory strategic goals.

Indeed the 'how', which Gantz did not address, nor will he for fear of losing votes from either the left or the right, is THE central question that has been bedeviling Israel for decades.

However, the Palestinians are not the central question of this election which remains 'who is suitable to lead' much more than what the next Prime Minister will do.

Benny Morris, once a revisionist historian, wrote an article in Ha'aretz which further explains why even the left do not feel there can be progress with the Palestinians at this point in time and therefore another reason why they are not a central issue in the elections.

Morris wrote: "... *the Zionist leadership—in 1937, 1947, 1978, 2000, 2007 and 2008—agreed to a solution based on territorial compromise, while the Palestinian leadership—under Haj Amin al-Husseini and Yasser Arafat and Mahmoud Abbas—consistently rejected any compromise proposed by the British, the United Nations and the governments of Israel ...* ."

Morris continued "... *as long as Abbas refuses to accept the formula of "two states for two peoples," and deceptively says that he does indeed support "two states" without mentioning "two peoples"—the difference between the current Palestinian president and his predecessors is marginal.*"

Interestingly all current Likud members of the Knesset running for reelection, bar one, have made statements or signed a declaration about applying sovereignty to the West Bank/Judea and Samaria.

The 'bar one' is Netanyahu himself. Which one journalist noted that as per usual, his silence, puts Netanyahu on the far left of his own party when it comes to the conflict.

Netanyahu continues to face the issue of the gap between his rhetoric and his actions.

Last month Tzipi Livni, a vocal political opponent and critic of Netanyahu's never the less noted about the minimal settlement building over the Green Line over the past 10 years - "*Why hasn't Netanyahu built up until now? Because he gets it,*" she said, referring to the Palestinian issue.

Moreover, she continued, "*Bibi will not go out and start a war. In that respect, he is responsible.*"

His problem, she asserted is *“that he’s under pressure from his rightist base on various issues, and sometimes he caves in to them. I’ll say it again, it isn’t him. I’ve spent hundreds of hours with him, his actual positions are different.”*

One area where Gantz has been clear, relates to the relationship with US Jewry. He gave a very strong commitment to his approval of the Western Wall compromise of 2015 and he also supported civil marriage in Israel itself.

This is a clever move to win back large sections of US Jewry as part of enhancing Israel’s support across the American political divide which in itself would be a strategic plus.

Gantz has made a credible beginning to his campaign according to the polls and his entry into the equation may cause smaller parties to merge and larger blocks of Israeli political parties to appear in an attempt to avoid falling below the threshold and dropping out of the Knesset all together.

However, the central question waiting to be answered remains, whether Benny Gantz the man, can convince the Israeli people that he is indeed a potential alternate Prime Minister.

If so, it’s game on.

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