

Five Weeks to Go Until Israel's Election: The Field Is Set

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Five weeks before Israel's October 27 election, the ballot is set. Thirty-eight lists have registered, and while parties can still withdraw, no further mergers are possible. The parties seeking to replace Netanyahu emerged from the deadline having reduced the risk of wasted votes: Gadi Eisenkot's Yashar absorbed a small center-right party, while the six main opposition parties, including the Arab parties, signed surplus-vote agreements.

Every Vote Counts

That merger could be highly consequential because Israel's 3.25 percent electoral threshold can turn a tiny difference in votes into a dramatic difference in seats. Parties that fall below the threshold receive no representation, and their votes are excluded entirely from the allocation of Knesset seats – effectively increasing the share of seats available to parties that clear it.

In 2022, Meretz won 150,696 votes – 3.14 percent – missing the threshold by just 4,124 votes. Balad, an Arab opposition party, came relatively close as well, winning 138,617 votes. Together, the two parties received almost 290,000 votes, but won zero seats. Had the two parties' votes counted, Netanyahu's bloc would have been severely weakened. Instead, his bloc won a 64-seat majority.

Netanyahu was less successful at reducing that risk within his own camp. Former general Ofer Winter's newly created Netanyahu-aligned party rejected efforts to merge with any other party and is running independently – currently hovering just above the threshold.

That makes Winter potentially pivotal. If he clears the threshold, [current polls](#) generally leave both blocs short of a majority, raising the prospect of another election or a broader unity government. But if Winter falls short of the threshold, enough right-wing votes could be wasted to give Eisenkot and the opposition a clearer path to forming a government.

Winter is now a key player for Netanyahu, who has a strong incentive to ensure that the former general clears the threshold.

October 7 – Is That What This Election Is About?

Israeli voters tend to vote first and foremost on security – not only in wartime. Yet while the reality outside the campaign is one of seven open security fronts, Israelis interpret that reality through an intensely polarized political lens. Netanyahu's supporters see his record over the past three years in reducing the threats facing Israel as unmatched; his opponents see the continuing number of open fronts as evidence of his failure to manage them.

Still, Netanyahu's government served its full term. He survived October 7 politically and could still emerge from the election as prime minister. But he has never escaped the central question raised by the worst day of his long tenure: his own responsibility for the strategic catastrophe that enabled the attack.

Netanyahu's approach has been to try to narrow that question to his actions the night before and the day of the attack, rather than the years of policies that led up to it. Most recently, he released his schedule from the night and morning of October 7 to bolster his argument that no one warned him or woke him before the attack. New information, however, is pushing the debate in the opposite direction.

According to a [new Haaretz investigation](#), UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed warned Netanyahu shortly before October 7 that Hamas was preparing a major operation. Crucially, the Haaretz investigation quotes Netanyahu as responding that there was no reason for concern. Netanyahu denies the exchange took place.

The disclosure expands the timeline of accountability. The question is no longer simply whether Netanyahu received a tactical warning in the hours before 6:29 a.m., but what he knew in the days and weeks before the attack – and whether he personally dismissed a warning that Hamas was preparing a major operation.

The timing of the election matters here too. The campaign is expected to accelerate after the Jewish holidays, just as Israel marks three years since the massacre. Netanyahu wants Israelis to judge him by the wars he fought after October 7. His opponents will try to make them judge him by the warnings that came before it.

That may matter less for persuading Netanyahu's core voters to change sides than for determining whether traditional Likud voters turn out at all. They do not have to vote for the opposition to hurt Netanyahu; staying home is enough.

Grief and Sacrifice Take Center Stage

The battle over the October 7 narrative is also visible on the party lists. An unusual number of candidates in high positions on party lists across the political spectrum have lost a first-degree relative since October 7. These include Yashar leader Gadi Eisenkot, whose son Gal was killed in action in Gaza; Yashar candidate Shira Shapira, whose son Aner was killed confronting Hamas terrorists on October 7; Likud candidate Talik Gwili, whose son Ran was killed fighting Hamas terrorists on October 7; and Yisrael Beytenu's Sharon Sharabi, whose brother Yossi was killed in Hamas captivity.

Bereaved families once occupied an almost sacrosanct place in Israeli public life, but the bitter struggle over the hostages and the war broke many of the taboos around treating grief as political. At the same time, as trust in established leaders collapsed, bereaved and hostage family members became some of the country's most recognizable and credible public voices.

For now, these candidates speak mostly about military service, unity, and responsibility. Whether they will eventually force Israeli politics to confront a harder question – not only who should bear the burden of sacrifice, but to what political end – remains to be seen.

Two Political Experiments

Ra'am has traditionally emphasized the domestic concerns of Arab citizens of Israel over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, an approach that allowed it to become the first independent Arab party to join an Israeli governing coalition. The party's leader, Mansour Abbas, placed former deputy public security minister Yoav Segalovich, a centrist Jewish MK and former police commander, in the number two spot on its slate. The move appears intended to make Ra'am a more acceptable coalition partner for centrist and center-right opposition leaders and voters who remain reluctant to rely on an Arab party for a Knesset majority.

A very different experiment is taking place in Haredi politics. HaTzibur HaHaredi ("The Haredi Public") is unlikely to cross the threshold, but its slate includes two women, who will be the first women ever to run for Knesset on a Haredi party list. The party represents an ideological challenge to the established Haredi parties: it seeks to preserve Haredi religious identity and protect full-time Torah study while embracing greater integration into Israeli society, including through military or national service for those who are not studying full-time, core-curriculum education, and full participation in the workforce.

Even the equivalent of a single mandate would mean tens of thousands of Haredim defying the sector's traditional political establishment – a potentially meaningful measure of change within the community that could shape future elections.

Signals From Abroad

Israel's allies are also sending signals to whoever forms the next government. A highly publicized visit by the U.S. ambassador to the West Bank delivered a blunt message about unchecked settler violence, while Britain has led a new sanctions initiative targeting the settlements, joined by 11 other countries. The war in Gaza, settler violence, and the planned E1 development are all driving this shift, including among governments that have close relations with Israel.

External pressure is unlikely to become a major election issue. It moves the debate onto terrain comfortable for Netanyahu and the right – foreign interference, claims of antisemitism, and the Palestinian question – that the mainstream opposition would rather avoid. But settler violence is increasingly becoming a domestic question of governance as well: whether the Israeli state is willing and able to impose its authority on extremists, even those operating from within its own political camps.