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Battle Over Arab Vote

By Amir Ettinger

- In 30 days, Israel's citizens will go to the polls. The big question is whether this [general election] will give Israel a stable government that will last for years and put an end to the endless election rounds. The factor that will perhaps decide this question more than anything else is voter turnout in the Arab sector. This question preoccupies both bloc leaders, Yair Lapid and Binyamin Netanyahu, to the same degree, but they approach it differently. Ever since the Arab Joint List split, with Balad running separately from Hadash-Taal, Netanyahu has been worried about three issues. Firstly, he wants a low voter turnout in the Arab sector and for Balad not to cross the electoral threshold. This will increase the chances of the right-wing bloc getting 61 seats. To that end, Netanyahu wants the Arab sector to be apathetic and not go to the polling stations. That is why the parties in the Netanyahu bloc did not vote on disqualifying Balad and the United Arab List (UAL/Ra'am), despite all the talk about their being terrorist supporters.
- The thinking was that this would spur the Arab sector to go and vote and help the Balad and UAL campaigns. The second issue that concerns Netanyahu is Interior Minister Ayelet Shaked. The Likud chairman made a decision to attack Shaked and siphon her voters until she quits the race. The reasoning is that Shaked doesn't have a chance of crossing the electoral threshold even with the Likud's quiet support. Her voters must therefore be siphoned so as not to waste votes. Behind the scenes, Bezalel Smotrich of the Religious Zionist Party and the Likud have thought about offering Shaked a cabinet position in exchange for her quitting, but Shaked has rebuffed such initiatives and claims that they were not made to her and that she will not accept any deal.
- The third matter is increasing voter turnout in the Likud and among right-wing voters who did not vote in the last few elections. Netanyahu has built an entire door-to-door mechanism whose goal is to go to the Likud cities and neighborhoods and knock on the doors and persuade people to vote.

This is the Likud's most expensive project, but on the ground, there is anger at Netanyahu from people who say that this is a separate project of his and the branches are not involved and not getting a budget. In the other bloc, Prime Minister Lapid is worried about low voter turnout in the Arab sector and wants to encourage the vote for UAL and for Hadash-Taal.

- Everyone realizes that Lapid's only chance of remaining prime minister is to prevent Netanyahu from having 61 seats and continue as prime minister of a transitional government, or alternatively, form a government that relies on the outside support of Ahmad Tibi and Ayman Odeh (leaders of Hadash-Taal), which could be considered kosher without Balad. But Justice Minister Gideon Sa'ar and Ze'ev Elkin from the National Unity Party are opposed to that. In any case, Lapid is dependent on the Arab vote. Lapid, therefore, decided that Yesh Atid's representatives would not take part in the vote to disqualify Balad.**
- Yesh Atid realizes that in any case, the Supreme Court will overturn the disqualification. Lapid also decided to try and gain voters at the expense of other parties in his bloc. Lapid believes that Yesh Atid must be the largest party in the bloc by a large margin. The ideal situation for him is that Meretz, the Labor Party, and Finance Minister and leader of Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel Our Home) Avigdor Liberman have four seats each and that Defense Minister Benny Gantz (National Unity Party) also gets a single-digit number of seats. The idea is that Gantz does not have the legitimacy to seek the position of prime minister. His UN speech about two states for two peoples was in order to give himself a boost among left-wing voters.**