THE ISRAELI ELECTORAL STATE OF MIND: SECURITY, DISCOURSE AND LEADERSHIP AS COMPONENTS OF THE 2015 ELECTIONS

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Abstract - *The 2015 Israeli general elections provide rare intellectual stimuli to trace and characterize some of the larger sociopolitical stances in Israeli society. Since Israeli politics has undergone many changes over the last decades, a focus on electoral moment unpacks the issues and general perception regarding geopolitics (i.e. the Israeli-Palestinian conflict) and the domestic health of the country (i.e. sociopolitical reforms and policy-developments). This paper aims at analyzing the three main dimensions, which were emphasized during the electoral campaign and the turnout, while it connects them with what we may refer to as the Israeli political "state of mind".*

Keywords: *Israel, elections, security, discourse, leadership*

1. *Introduction*

Israeli politics has changed quite a bit due to external factors, namely the everlasting conflict with the Palestinians and Arab states, as well as domestic ones, e.g. trends in policies regarding the welfare state, center-periphery tensions or the ethnic issue dividing Ashkenazi and Sephardi Israelis; which all characterize Israeli society. The former have deeply influenced Israel's «state of mind», an ambiguous concept - yet fruitful to our analysis since it perfectly fits into constructivist social theories. A «state of mind» may be used as a disposition emerged from the formation of individual opinion and preference, socially derived from socialization and political learning, and which consists in the identification of collective problems.It is thus a corpus, an intangible but all-encompassing substructure of mental pictures that construct reality[1]. Moreover, it presents some interchangeabilities with the more common disposition of identity, since both imply the social importance of ideas, culture and values. Yet, one may ask: first, what is the balance here? Second, how can identity,-which is multifaceted and multi-layered can be "photographed"? This paper exemplifies the concept by reconstructing the 2015 Israeli elections, while using the concept «state of mind» not only because of its evocativeness but mainly because it is sentisive to the context,-on the one hand, the stratified political situation in Israel; while on the other,the period of elections which is dynamic and, consequently, susceptible to change. In other words, the analysis is based upon the general assumption that a particle of identity can be observed and analyzed in a specific time span. It thus proposes a less binding concept, i.e. 'state of mind' in order not to banalize identity but still permitting an analytical evaluation of the latter's "fragments" as they are expressed in a specific event. It offers this concept in order to describe the meaning and attributes that can be traced throughout the Israeli elections,

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[1] The concept of «state of mind» is underdeveloped in social sciences and has never been used to analyze electoral behaviour. However, it is borrowed and re-adapted here from three articles in the field of international relations. See C. E. Lindblom (1982): «Another State of Mind», *The American Political Science Review*, 76(1), 9–21; where the author refers to the "a common prevailing habit of mind" (one whould simplifies it to "a way of thinking") amongst American political scholars regarding American politics (p.9, note 2). Another contribution is that of J. E. Rielly (1987): «America's State of Mind», *Foreign Policy*, (66), 39–56; which seems to connote the term (used solely in the article's title) with "public concern" as American citizens prioritize certain issues over other. The third author is R. Morgan (2000): «A European "Society of States" -but only States of Mind?» , *International Affairs*, 76(3), 559–574. "a mental or cognitive reconstruction" (p. 560) with an emphasis on ideas, culture and values. The conceptualization of the notion is discussed in greater detail in the section: *Case selection and theoretical framework.*

while it attempts to mitigate the weight of identity and its major components. Therefore, it wishes to tackle the following questions: *how can the political «state of mind» be of use in unpacking the Israeli 2015 general elections?* It thus hypothesizes that it is fruitful to use the concept of «state of mind» as a container of sociopolitical macro trends with micro specificities in time and place. The latter enables to introduce a broader range of changing phenomena (the focal aspects of analysis) as they emerge from and during the elections.

This is made possible by focusing on the erosion of traditional issues (namely geopolitical and social security, peace, sociopolitical and ethnic-cultural status quo etc.) and the revival of other issues, not less important, such as social equity and cohesion; as they emerge from the electoral turnout. While the «state of mind» consists of transient features (e.g. emotions and\or content), the concept of identity presents a more solid structural features (common and lasting practices) which are more easily detectable at the social level. However, there is no need to abandon neither the first concept nor the second, since they can be jointly contextualized as segments of an institutionalized (though problematically politicized) national identity (Gellner, 1987; Brubaker, 1996).

Unpacking Israeli politics through the concepts of identity and «state of mind» is a true *tour de force.* Despite its inherent complexity, such an enquiry is feasible once some aspects are assumed as focal points: 1) the political discourse and political legitimacy; 2) the tension between Israel's national and social security; 3) the antagonistic stances in leadership. Those three aspects have become key-issues in Israeli politics since its independence in 1948. Israeli democracy has been facing continuous challenges concerning war, social unrest and ideological polarization. Such an analytical effort becomes useful, since it combines both the intricate Israeli sociopolitical history and the shifty range of political trends. That is to say that elections provide an opportunity to deconstruct the elements citizenry perceives and considers paramount in democratic politics beyond the procedural definition of the former[2]. A wider interpretation of elections, inspired by constructivist framework, emphasizes the relevance of institutions aiming to negotiate and institutionalize power relations between those who govern and those who are governed. Consequently, one can argue that Israeli democratic elections engender an essential sociopolitical setting,

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[2] The procedural definition is: «[A]n election is a device for filling public offices by reference to popular preferences», A. Heywood (2004), *Political Theory: An Introduction*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, p. 235.

as political institutions and popular vote reveal the depth and breadth of Israeli identity. The electoral moment thus facilitates the delineation of multi-factorial trends (e.g. fragmentation and sectorialization of political offer, political antagonisms, sociopolitical polarization etc.). By adopting the general elections as key-venue, whose time span is quite limited, we can observe and unpack the Israeli «state of mind», while contextualizing current dynamics in Israeli political culture. That said, -and though it is difficult to predict or determine the balance between the key-aspects we focus on-, we can trace deeper and broader phenomena in Israel and thus help to better understand its sociopolitical reality.

2. Case selection and theoretical framework

Though literature has been generous in examining Israeli politics and society there is still room for scientific enquiries about the politico-cultural antagonisms (which often find their expression in the so-called «ethnic cleavage» between Israelis of Ashkenazi descent and those with Sephardic origins)[3] and the political transformation of the party-system (especially with regard to the rise of radical right parties and the issues of coalition-building in Israel)[4].Moreover, when parliamentary elections are concerned - there has been little effort to approach them beyond their procedures and technicalities[5]. The latter means there is a gap to fill in by complementary

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[3] The term "Ashkenazi" denotes Jewish population of Europeam (especially Central-Eastern) descent, whereas the term "Sephardi" denotes Jews from Iberian origin (prior to the 1492) who settled in Arab-speaking countries (also known as "Orientals" or "Mizrahim" [Hebrew]). On Israeli cleavages, see B. Kimmerling (2001) *The Invention and Decline of Israeliness: State, Society, and the Military*, Berkley, Los Angeles and London, University of California Press; Y. Goodman and J. Loss (2009), «The Other as Brother: Nation-Building and Ethnic Ambivalence in Early Jewish-Israeli Anthropology», *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol. 82, No. 2, pp. 477-508; Avi Bareli (2009), «Mapai and the Oriental Jewish Question in the Early Years of the State», in *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society"* n.s. 16, No. 1, pp.54–84; As'ad Ghanem (2010), *Ethnic Politics in Israel: The Margins and the Ashkenazi Center*, Abingdon, New York, Routledge.

[4] For example: E. Sprinzak (1989) «The Emergence of the Israeli Radical Right» in *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 21, No. 2, pp. 171-192, and his book entitled *The Ascendance of Israel's Radical Right* (1991), New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press; D. Filc and U. Lebel (2005) «The Post-Oslo Israeli Populist Radical Right in Comparative Perspective: Leadership, Voter Characteristics and Political Discourse» in *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 10, No.1, pp. 85-97.

[5] It is noteworthy to mention the socio-spatial approach offered by two Israeli geographers who have studied political partisanship as reflected from the electoral results (see I. Charney and D. Malkinson (2015), «Between Electoral and Urban Geography: Voting Patterns and Socio-Spatial Dynamics in Tel-Aviv», *Applied Geography*, 58, pp. 1-6); as

analysis of elections as a moment in which the Israeli «state of mind» reveals itself beyond the traditional procedural analysis, often based on the classic definitions of left\right dichotomies and other party-centred antagonisms. In other words, it has been the Israeli democratic parliamentary system as a "container", so to speak, to have been analyzed much more often than how certain components of its political identity have been reflected by and through the elections themselves. For all the abovementioned reasons, this paper aims to delineate the constellation of political factors at the moment of the democratic vote through an identity-based analysis. Its point of departure draws on recent lessons concerning both the multifaceted nature of identity and the populistic elements which have been characterized western democracies (i.e. leadership, charisma, the people\not-people dichotomy) without neglecting political communication subject-matters (i.e. issue-setting).

The concept of «state of mind» is preferred here to the more developed and commonly accepted concept of 'habitus' (whichs recalls the "social personality structure" or "stage and pattern of individual self-regulation"[6]. This is because it better evokes the transitory moment of elections and the conjuncture politics finds itself in that moment, while suggesting that any electoral campaign and vote behavior are influenced by "mindsets" of "moods" (both synonyms of the concept as it is used here); rather than by the certain historical society ("figuration" in Eliasian terminology) that has modelled communal social regularities (i.e. norms and rules) or the structuralist emphasis the notion of 'habitus' finds in Bourdieu[7].

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well as the more historical\sociological approach of Alexander Bligh in studying voting patterns and political key-actors in the Israeli Arab population (see A. Bligh (2013),«Political trends in the Israeli Arab population and its vote in parliamentary elections», *Israel Affairs* 19 (1), pp. 201-219.

[6] Habitus, therefore, entails a common space that different individuals share together as well as the shared norms and rules that individuals make their own. The concept may describe 'democracy' as a set of shared ground rules. Yet, it is usually used to explain social structure than the content it encompasses. See N.Elias (1991): "*The Society of Individuals*", London-New York: Continuum (especially p.182).

[7] According to Bourdieu, the habitus is both the generative principle of objectively classifiable judgements and the system of classification (principium divisionis) of practices i.e. the space of life-styles, manners, habits etc. Hence, "[…] it is a general, transposable disposition which carries out a systematic, universal application-beyond the limits of what has been directly learnt-of the necessity inherent in the learning conditions. P. Bourdieu (1984):"*Distinction: A Social Critique of The Judgement of Taste*", Cambridge [MA: USA], Harvard University Press (p.170). Like Elias, Bourdieu also emphasizes the long-termstructural relevance of 'habitus': "[B]eing the product of history, it is an *open system of dispositions* that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by

Nonetheless, both concepts are borrowed from the scientific fields of sociology and psychology, and are deeply dependant on the process of socialization. Thus, one can address the conceptualization of a 'state of mind' in a more flexible and sensibile-to-change mode, as it is less stuructarlyy-binding than the concept of 'habitus'. As our case is 2015 Israeli elections the concept easily encompasses short-term variations which do not necessarily have far-reaching consequences.

In other words, the conceptual framework is thus useful because it gathers elements which result constant but whose relevance changes in breadth and depth, according to reality. Since it is quite difficult to determine the weight and ways in which structural features of political identity (e.g. ideology, socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds etc.) directly affect the results of elections, the concept "state of mind" becomes a disposition that takes into account the effect of these features without deterministically over\under-estimate the former. In other words, the concept permits us to trace their flexibility or the shifty fashion in which they are manifested. Not only does "state of mind" explain the dynamics built-up during the elections, but it also contextualizes the features the concept itself encompasses (namely, identity, - and the other elemnts that are engendered by it). Consequently, it suggests both the aspects that are reflected as the elections go on, and the mechanisms that political agents use in shaping the electoral discourse as well as some of the issues and strategies they deploy to their advantage. Therefore, the concept is analytically profitable (though it is almost absent from political sciences, not to say from the field of electoral behaviour). Its usefulness, as a theoretical framework, is that it enable s a twofold analysis. On the one hand, it is sensible to the systemic structures of politics (parties, candidates, leaders etc.); on the other, the perspective allows a wider understanding of issues and the space they occupy before and after elections. Hence, "state of mind" facilitates the elaboration of hypotheses and mechanisms.Moreover, it identifies how the abovementioned dispositions conform to the specific political reality and the phenomena it engenders. It thus surpasses the limits of short-term\long-term analysis, and formulates an empiric analysis which is based upon contextualization. It highlights the role of agency, the

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them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures" (p. 133) […] "a *historical transcendental* bound up with the structure and history of a field" (p.189); P.Bourdieu,L. Wacquant (1992):"*An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*",Cambridge: Oxford, University of Chicago Press: Polity.

structures in which political interaction takes place and the content that "runs through" a certain period of time (whereas "identity" does not present such analytical fluidity, nor does it entail a rather short-term periodization). Consequently, it allows us to elaborate trends without neglecting identity-based categories (i.e. the ethnic cleavage, for istance) or the context which is constructed during a political event *par excellence* (namely, elections). The result is the ability to delieante changes from similar events and formulate more precise expectations for future ones. To be more precise, the combination of 'state of mind' (a semi-flexible concept vis-à-vis the more ambiguous concept of 'identity' and the structuralist concept of 'habitus') combined to a time span,- which is easily osservable and delimitable-, allow us to identify mechanisms (namely, the emphatization of the different interpretations of 'security' as experienced by Israelis, the personalization of politics,-and the role charismatic leadership occupies in the process-, as well as the broader political discourse and its legitimacy) that cross the eventful elections and situate them in time and space. It, consequently, creates an opportunity for a broader and more flexible application of both conceptual and empirical extension containing mutltiple sociopolitical factors of Israeli society[8].

By focusing upon the general elections in Israel 2015, not only can we trace the course of events, especially during the electoral campaign, identify key-actors, but also extract some of the observable implications of the country's political, social and cultural features,- and, thus, organize and weigh the dynamics and problematics which stem from them.Though, the concept is not exhaustive in explaining the entire electoral event, it does,-however-, widen the analytical range from specificity (i.e. the elections) to the more variagetd political reality which preeeded it. In other words, the proposed conceptualization organizes the broader interconnections between parallel and related elements. In addition, politically-relevant chronicles gain analytical and processual relevance of long-term trends.

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[8] It thus offers a sort of conceptual "stretching" which is advantageous, since it only attempts to encompass both stable and transient aspects of Israeli identity without abolishing any other conceptual framework. On concept stretching, see G. Sartori (1970): "Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics", *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 64, No. 4 (Dec., 1970), pp. 1033-1053; G. Sartori (1984): "Guidelines for Concept Analysis" in *Social Science Concepts: A Systematic Analysis ,*ed. G.Sartori, Beverly Hills, Sage (commented and analysed in D. Collier and J. E. Mahon, Jr. (1993): "Conceptual Stretching Revisited: Adapting Categories in Comparative Analysis", *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 87, No. 4 (Dec., 1993), pp. 845-855.

With regard to methodology, the concept stems from a process-tracing analysis and expository writing, since its construction is based upon the systematic "drawing descriptive and causal inferences from diagnostic pieces of evidence"[9] and analytically "designed to convey to the reader how a change takes place through a series of stages"[10]. Furthermore, the three aspects which are traced (i.e. political discourse and legitimacy, the dual interpretation of security, the antagonistic stances in leadership) are also variables with causal roles, included in a "within case-analysis"[11], aimed at "developing historical explanations of particular cases, attaining high levels of construct validity, and using contingent generalizations to model complex relationships such as path dependency and multiple interactions effects"[12]. In addition, the merit of the concept and the approach is that it helps explaining something; not only the (pre)course of electoral results but also the components of a sociopolitical fabric that emerges in a key-event of democratic rule. Hence, it offers a broader analysis of any dyanamic political context. It therefore offers a new mode of looking at elections, not only as the outcome of political maneuvering but also as a key-venue which embodies features of national identity and contains what politicians make of it.That is to say, the 'state of mind' which can be traced from the Israeli general elections may provide a "theoretical explanation relevant to the wider phenomenon of which the case is an instance"[13]: the case of Israeli political identity as reflected by the the electoral event. More accurately, the three dimensions on which the analysis lingers are aspects of the Israeli

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[9] D. Collier: "Understanding Process Tracing", *PS: Political Science and Politics* 44, No. 4 (2011): 823-30 (citation, p. 824).
[10] A. Bennett, A.L. George (2001): Chapter 4: "*Case Studies and Process Tracing in History and Political Science: Similar Strokes for Different Foci*" (p.137-166; cit., p.162) in C. Elman and M.F. Elman (eds.): "*Bridges and Boundaries: Historians, Political Scientists, and the Study of International Relations*", Cambridge [MA], MIT Press.
[11] A. Bennett (2004): Chapter 11: "*Integrating Comparative and Within-Case Analysis: Typological Theory*"(pp.233-262), in A.L. George, A. Bennett (2004):"*Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*", Cambridge [MA]: London, MIT Press.
[12] A. Bennett (2004): Chapter 2: "*Case Study Methods: Design, Use and Comparative Advantages*", pp. 19-55; in Y. Wolinsky-Nahmias, D.F. Sprinz (eds.): "*Models, Numbers, and Cases: Methods for Studying International Relations*", Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press (cit.p.19).). That is to say the method: "Involves looking at evidence within an individual case, or a temporally and spatially bound instance of a specified phenomenon, to derive and/or test alternative explanations of that case. In other words, process tracing seeks a *historical explanation* […]". A. Bennet (2008): Chapter 30: "*Process Tracing: A Bayesian Perspective*" (p.702-721; cit. p.704), in J. M. Box-Steffensmeier, H. E. Brady and D. Collier [eds.]: *"The Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology"*, 2008.
[13] A. Bennet (2008), p. 704.

political identity. They feature and reflect issues from which one can trace their processual relevance and delineate a «state of mind» as it is taking form. The construction of these dimensions is the result of specific literature on macro long-term phenomena in Israel in light of the inference they assumed during the 2015 elections. However, before we examine those features point by point, we must reconstruct the event itself.

3. *Political Dynamics in 2015 Israel*

The Israeli electoral system is based on proportional representation based on the Hagenbach-Bischoff model. The entire national territory serves as a single electoral constituency in which 120 Knesset-members are elected (with a closed-list system). Since Israeli democracy represents a significant fragmented sociopolitical factions: Jewish and non- Jewish, lay and religious along the ideological dichotomy of Left and Right-, the national party system consists of a plurality of political actors. Hence, the Israeli multi-party system[14] often generates political alliances between different political actors by opting for wide colations and political blocs.

The table below summarizes the essential figures on which our analysis is based. It underlines Israeli parties and the centrality of their leaders as well as the fragmentation of the Israeli political supply[15] in relation to the previous electoral round. The total Israeli suffrage comprised 5,881,696 voters from which only 4,254,738 individuals went to the ballot. 4,210,884 votes were qualified as legally valid (i.e. 43,854 disqualified or 1.03%). The voter turnout reached 72.34% (against 67.8% in the 2013 general elections); the highest rate since 1999 (78.7%). The legal threshold was 3.25% (or the number of 136,854 valid votes).

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[14] In the 2013 general elections 120 members of Knesset (MKs) were elected from 12 parties, whereas in the 2015 elected Knesset 10 parties are represented.

[15] The table includes only the winning parties of the 2015 general elections. Notwithstanding it is important to mention that other 15 electoral lists had registered at the Israeli Central Elections Committee 2015 prior to the electoral campaign. These lists gained approx. 190,000 votes (circa 4.5% of the total amount) and did not surpass the legal threshold.

TABLE 1 - *Elections for the 20th Knesset 17 March 2015*

Parties elected to Knesset	Party Leader	% Votes	No. Seats	Trend Compared to 2013 General Elections
Likud	Benjamin Netanyahu	23.40%	30	+12
Zionist Union	Isaac Herzog (Labour Party) Tzipi Livini (Hatnuah)	18.67%	24	+3
Arab Joint List	Ayman Odeh	10.54%	13	+2
Yesh Atid	Yair Lapid	8.81%	11	-8
Kulanu	Moshe Kahlon	7.49%	10	New
The Jewish Home	Naftali Bennett	6.74%	8	-4
Shas	Aryeh Deri	5.73%	7	-4
Yisrael Beitenu	Avigor Lieberman	5.11%	6	-7
United Torah Judaism	Yaakov Litzman	5.03%	6	-1
Meretz	Zehava Gal-On	3.93%	5	-1

Source: Israeli Central Elections Committee 2015.

The institutional context prior to the 2015 elections. - On 8 December 2014, the 19th Knesset passed a bill to dissolve itself and hold general elections on 17 January 2015. This was the result of tumultuous debates which put an end to Netanyahu's third government. Increasing difficulties in compacting coalition lines over ideology and policy-making had been decisive in this final parliamentary vote[16]. A significant debate was over the electoral threshold. The latter had been changed in March 2014 (from 2% to 3.25%) and soon became a matter of dispute. The change was chiefly endorsed by

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[16] We refer in particular to the wave of resignations within the 33th Israeli government starting from Minister of Internal Affairs Gideon Sa'ar (Likud) on 4 November 2014 and ending with the dismissals from office of Justice Minister Tzipi Livni and Finance Minister Yair Lapid on 2 December 2014.

Minister of Foreign Affairs Avigdor Lieberman and his party Israel Our Home (*Yisrael Beiteinu*). The political decision was based on the evaluation that the reduction of the number of (small) parties better secured governability and thus automatically encouraged effective political mergers[17]. Nonetheless, alternative explanations for the amendment may be found. In addition to assertions about governability, the Governance Bill aimed at shrinking the political weight of Netanyahu's opponents from the two antagonistic poles of Israeli politics. Its aim was to discourage multipolar representation in the Israeli parliament starting from the so-called «sectorial parties»: the Arab parties (Bligh, 2013) and the ultra-Orthodox ones (vis-à-vis the so-called «consensual» ones). While Arab parties are "uncomfortably" anti-Zionist, the religious parties have long been controversial in their demands (i.e. financial resources to their own communities) fort hem to take part in any coalition. Despite political differences, the two political groups heavily criticized the «undemocratic» amendment. The Knesset vote took place on 11 March 2014 with 67 votes in favour of the new electoral law (endorsed by the entire governing coalition), while opposition traversally boycotted it[18].

Another - even more controversial - political move was the *Basic Law proposal: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People*; originally submitted by Knesset Members Avi Dichter (Kadima)[19] and Ze'ev Elkin (Likud) in August 2011 and archived at the time. Nonetheless, a similar draft law was represented in the Knesset in March 2013 after the issue had become a part of the 19th Knesset negotiations, between the Likud- Yisrael Beitenu and The Jewish Home to form a new coaltion headed by Benjamin Netanyahu. Several complementary proposals followed. The Nation-State Law bill defines several identity-building\conservation principles for contemporary Israel to follow. It calls for the State of Israel to be *legally identified* as the «nation state of the Jewish people» anchored to the ancient Jewish Torah Laws: source of inspiration for Israeli civic law and other judicial norms. Furthermore, it stipulates that the *Hebrew language is the sole official language* of the state; contrary to the existing legal status quo

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[17] The dynamics of the "Governance Bill" are journalistically summarized in the following articles: http://www.timesofisrael.com/governance-bill-is-a-game-changer-for-israeli- (Hebrew); http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politi/1.2083301politics/ (English); (Hebrew). http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politi/1.2086308

[18] The amendment (n.62 of the Israeli Electoral Law) was officially published on 19.3.2014.

[19] In August 2012 Avi Dichter resigned from the Knesset. He later joined the ranks of the Likud but failed to be elected for the party's list for the 19th Knesset. Nonetheless, his endeavour was accomplished in the Likud's list for the 20th Knesset.

(that has existed in Israel since its independence) which considered both Hebrew and Arabic as official languages. It also denotes Israeliness and Jewishness as an inseparable, inviolable, cultural stratum. It further facilitates the acquisition of Israeli citizenship by every Jew living in Diaspora (paragraph 5), while it juxtaposes the precarious legal status of non-Jews in Israel (namely, Arabs whose forefathers have been living within the State's geographical borders from days immemorial). Moreover, it clearly represents an ideological U-turn from liberal discourse by the already rightist coalition. Although the bill did not pass, the mere necessity to theorize and adopt such basic-law implies far-reaching consequences: the deterioration of Jewish-Arab relations (i.e. the insoluble tensions regarding Israeli Arab population' solidarity with the Palestinians and the rest pf the Arab World). The dispute reached its climax in the form of a new political actor: the Arab Joint List (formally the Joint List)[20]. Since our scope conditions underline the important role played by identity politics in Israel with regard to the country's self-image as being Jewish and the use of it in advocating for governability, such political dynamics further strengthen the assumption that Israeli politics, and consequently general elections, are characterized by discourse continuity, engendered by the difficulty to establish and interpret a shared national identity.However, this hypothesis does not exclude any divergent modes aimed at gaining political consensus. After all, the prioritisation of issues does not only shift according to general social and cultural phenomena but also consists of the political offer and its effects on the electorate.

The next paragraph wishes to provide some general notions about *legitimacy* and *legalistic discourse* as structural aspects in Israeli politics (and culture, alike)[21]. The two are intimately linked to the issues of *security* and leadership, while taking on new forms through time and socio-political change. Hence, they can be used as four analytical variables representing contextual circumstances within Israeli politics; and thus outline the country's «state of mind». The following paragraphs unpack some of the

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[20] The birth of the Joint List was widely reported by both Israeli and foreign media. See Ruth Eglash (10 March 2015), «Israel's Arab political parties have united for the first time», *The Washington Post* (retrieved 22 September 2015); Hassan Shaalan (22 January 2015) «Arab parties to run as one list in upcoming elections», *YnetNews* (retrieved 22 September 2015); Elhanan Miller (4 March 2015), «*After uniting Arabs behind him, Ayman Odeh looks to lead opposition*» (retrieved 14 June 2015).

[21] A thorough panorama of Israeli cultural and legal history, jurisprudence-based yet highly interdisciplinary, in analyzed in M. Mautner (2011): "*Law and the Culture of Israel*", Oxford: New York, Oxford University Press.

political dynamics which the the 2015 electoral event derived from (namely political interests and tactics).

4. *The three dimensions of the Israeli «State of Mind» in light of the 2015 elections*

Legitimacy in the Electoral Discourse. - The electoral campaign for the 20th Knesset featured some significant challenges discourse-wise. It owed some of its roots to the short-lived government which had run the 2014 summer Israel-Gaza conflict (officially Operation Protective Edge) and should have provided practical responses to the open domestic issues of the 2011 Israeli social justice protests.

But before discussing the polemic thematization of national security versus welfare-related security, some words must be spent over the so-called *legalistic discourse* in current Israeli politics: «The *language and practices-* about state law has been in some decline in Israeli society and it might be the case in other countries as well, since it has *failed to provide path breaking social reforms*»[22]. This peculiar kind of discourse has played an important part in Israeli society and serves as a useful tool in order to understand the *Israeli People's Army Model* aimed to implement the policy of the so-called Jewish *melting pot*. The legalistic discourse is usually combined with civil duty rhetorics, thus legitimizing «massive state interference in social and political life during security crises. Inter alia, the political establishment imposes compulsory recruitment of people and economic resources, controls information, and curtails individual freedoms of expression, association, and demonstration. The state promotes the emergence of exacting sociopolitical and legal norms and endorses severe sanctions against the opponents of war»[23]. However, noteworthy is the fragile and almost unfelt scope of this institutionalized *civilian welfare* against the hard-power *civilian militarism*[24] which is often critized as the motor behind Israeli liberal *ethnocracy*[25]. No

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[22] Shulamit Almog and Gad Barzilai, *Social Protest and the Absence of Legalistic Discourse: In the Quest for New Language of Dissent*, Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2014: author's personal copy (italics are mine).

[23] Gad Barzilai, «War, Democracy, and Internal Conflict: Israel in a Comparative Perspective», published in *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (Apr., 1999), pp. 317-336 (citation taken from page 318).

[24] Baruch Kimmerling (2001): *The Invention and Decline of Israeliness: State, Culture and Military in Israel*, Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 208-209.

[25] Shlomo Sand (2009): *"The Invention of the Jewish People"*, London; New York, Verso, p. 307.

social issue had ever been equally legitimized. Kimmerling (2001: pp. 208-228) suggested that such sociopolitical discourse kept\ keeps marginalizing and counterbalancing values of pluralism, whilst it forms a routinized *military-cultural complex*. Even the tumoltous 2011 wave of social protests[26] had little effect on the general legalistic discourse. Yet an attempt to repropose such a discourse took shape in the last electoral campaign. This was made possible as a result of common sentiment of disillusionment, scepticism and democratic discontent towards the state and its political system.The explosion of anti-politics rhetoric has been often labelled as demagoguery and\or (neo)populism[27]. The latter implies that democracy-stakeholders (voters and representatives alike) may strive for different political trajectories and rethink their political agendas; thus dynamically influencing policies[28]. Such tendencies are observed in many mature democracies, which experience decreasing economic growth and increasing political instability. The loud critique coming from the people is, therefore, a sort of an antiestablishment strategy, promoted by populist radical-right parties that «present themselves as the real champions of true democracy-as a new kind of party-which takes the worries and interests of the common man into account»[29]. Their anti-establishment discourse usually comprises anti-elite echoes. Israel is no different. With the last social protest undergoing a sort of transformative institutionalization into technocratic committees[30], the initial popular enthusiasm enjoyed lesser public visibility. The cases of Stav Shaffir and Itzik Shmuli are exemplary in this sense. Both had been leading protesters who joined party-politics through the ranks of the Labour Party in 2012.

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[26] The so-called wave of social protests refers to the series of demonstrations against the continuing rise of living costs in Israel. The first protest (June 2011) concerned food prices starting from a Facebook-led Israeli consumer boycott of cottage cheese (which is perceived as a basic national food commodity). The «Cottage Cheese Boycott» preceded more general protests (14 July 2011 - 29 October 2011) regarding the housing crisis and the increasing poverty rates. The latter are known by several names: «Social Justice protest», «Cost of Living protest», «Tents protest», or simply the «Middle Class protest».

[27] N. Bobbio, N. Matteucci, G. Pasquino, 2004, (edited by) *Dizionario di Politica,* Torino: UTET.

[28] Michael C. Campbell (2016), «Are All Politics Local? A Case Study of Local Conditions in a Period of Law and Order Politics», in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 664(1), pp. 43-61.

[29] J. Rydgren «The Sociology of the Radical Right». in *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 33 (2007), pp. 241-262 (citation taken from p. 246).

[30] The major Social-Economic Change Committee, also known as the Trajtenberg Committee, gave birth to the political candidacy of the person heading it; Prof. Manual Trajtenberg who was elected as the 11th Knesset Member of the Zionist Union.

The two were then elected to the Knesset in 2013. In spite of the high visibility and reputation gained during the wave of social protests, their post-manifestation experiences clearly show the centrality of traditional political participation in Israel. Nonetheless, social sensibility did not diminish because of Netanyahu's market-oriented economic policies. The Israeli political arena simply had no political figure to express the ongoing social unrest and provide politically relevant tools to oppose to Netanyahu's capitalist agenda within the party-system. However, an ex-politician did eventually proposed himself as a true fighter for social justice. The somewhat grey personality of Moshe Kahlon[31] who suddenly waved the flag of social equality and anti-capitalism. He expressed his discontent of the "fat and greedy" tycoons on top of clear ideology. He embodied something similar to the traditional legalistic discourse (but with a more sensational touch), while avoiding a too harsh of rhetoric and overcoming the traditional Right-Left dichotomy. Only towards the end of his electoral campaign, he freestyled his Likudnik[32] profile. This political manoeuvre obtained a remarkable electoral result: his party *Kulanu* (lit. All of Us) won 10 seats in the Knesset (315,202 votes, or 7.49% of the total votes cast) and thus became the fifth-largest party to represent the Israeli electorate. Kahlon became a decisive figure in the political arena, as he was able to tip the balance of power in forming Netanyahu's new Centre-Right coalition[33]. But one might wonder whether Moshe Kahlon's political endeavour did break the walls of national security-based discourse in Israeli politics? As the issue of national security has defined much of Israel's identity, the next paragraph unpacks this question while delineating how the term «security» was interpreted and used in the last general elections.

The Dual Nature of Security - Israeli elections have always been determined by the inevitable issue of security. The latter defines a "day-to-day" reality and thus must be constantly dealt with. However, the term assumed two different meanings in the last electoral campaign. Political

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[31] Kahlon had been a former member of the Likud, former Minister of Communications (2009-2013) as well as Minister of Welfare and Social Services (2011-2013). Two years after he had taken a break from politics in 2012, Moshe Kahlon founded a new political party, the *Kulanu* party (We All Together) which won 10 seats in the Knesset.

[32] The noun "Likudnik" (Hebrew :ליכודניק) refers to the Israeli center-right political party Likud,its members,supporters and voters. It can also assume the form of an adjective, thus describing the values and attitudes of the Israeli center-right.

[33] He has overtly demanded the Finance Ministry and other social-related portfolios for other party-members.

discourse parallelly contained both the traditional sense of security referred to peace and war (with the dichotomous metaphor of hawks vs. doves in relation to the Israeli-Arab conflict) but also its interpretation as a significant component in domestic affairs - that is to say social welfare (especially housing), taxation etc[34]. It seemed like hawks and doves had lost their supremacy to the binding legalistic discourse of good government, anchored to the difficulties in providing equal social opportunities. However, at the end of the electoral campaign the softer, domestic, though politically instrumental, rhetoric of social security did die out.

On Election Day, 17 March 2015, Prime Minister Netanyahu broadcasted a video on his Facebook page-event warning that Israeli Arabs were heading to the polls «in droves»[35]. This key-moment in Netanyahu's campaign of increasing «fear and racism»[36] ended with what spin-doctors, PR experts, journalists and other communication professionals considered to be «Bibi's Three-Day War», «Bibi's Blitz» or a «Three-Day Push»[37]. The well-staged incorrect cry for help revived the We vs. Them dichotomy

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[34] Intrestingly enough, there are no available public opinion suveys regarding what Israeli citizens think of state-security, nor on socioeconomic security. However, the Central Bureau of Statistics does publish the so-defined "self-security" survuey. Although the latter is not specific to geopolitical threats (i.e. war, terrorism), it reads that: "[I]n December 2015 [thus after the general elections of March] the wave of terror attacks continued, but the rate of residents who felt safe increased (this change might indicate that the residents had become accustomed to the existing security situation)", Israel's Crime Victimization Survey 2015, Central Bureau of Statistics 2015, p.26; available at: http://www.cbs.gov.il (the survey is realized yearly since 2014 (the first survey did not address the issue). With regard to socioeconomic security, some surveys are realized by private institutes (such as Nielsen Holdings PLC) to Israeli consumers (thus from a very specific and limited point of view),- which usually show economic pessimism-, and compare them to OECD statistics (e.g. recession, growth, unemployment etc.).

[35] The warning also stated that the Israeli radical left was sponsored by foreign governments (i.e. Iran) attempting to put an end to Likud rule and repeated the allegations against the V15 (Victory 20015) campaign (financed by the international grassroots movement OneVoice). The Facebook video (in Hebrew) is available on (last accessed https://www.facebook.com/268108602075/posts/10152778935532076 19/06/17).

[36] The anti-liberal statement was largely reported and criticized by journalists and intellectuals with Israeli Arab TV host and journalist Lucy Aharish (a "torch-lighter" to be at Israel's next Independence Day ceremony, themed "Israeli breakers") as the main defender of democracy-loving Israel.

[37] For two journalistic examples that used this kind of denomination, see the following:
http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/18/us-israel-election-fallout
(English); idUSKBN0ME10120150318
(Hebrew). http://www.maariv.co.il/news/elections-2015/Article-468742

against the Israeli Left (a legitimate opponent to outdo) but also manifested racist demagoguery which had penetrated the Israeli state of mind by denigrating the 20% Arab minority of equal-right Israeli citizens. The pro-welfare rhetoric vanished all of a sudden as Netanyahu's warning resulted in the Likud's 30-seat victory, not to mention the personal triumph Netanyahu himself achieved over the «monopolistically unrepresentative leftish media»[38]. His anti-Arab statement soon became an international scandal with US President Barack Obama saying, during an interview to the American Huffington Post (March 21st) that: «We indicated that that kind of rhetoric was contrary to what is the best of Israel's traditions»[39]. A very similar statement by the deputy spokesperson for the United States Department of State Marie Harf followed on March 23rd.

The fact Israeli voters let the national security-led discourse to take over the socially-based discourse show how much the two issues occupy different places in the country's political discourse (with security vis-à-vis the Arab threat as the naion's highest priority). Prime Minister Netanyahu formally apologized to Israeli Arabs when an official delegation of Israeli Arab dignitaries were hosted at the PM's residence six days after the «misfortunate statement». On that evening of March 23 Channel 10 broadcaster Oshrat Kotler interviewed the Joint List chairman Ayman Odeh about the reconciliation between Netanyahu and the Arab minority. The charismatic Arab leader rejected the apology, since 90% of Israeli Arabs who had voted the Joint List against Netanyahu's racist ideology were not invited to the Prime Minister's Residence. In addition, Israeli President Reuven Rivlin, a longtime critic of Netanyahu, announced that formal consultations on Israel's new government were finally reached their conclusion with Netanyahu being re-appointed as Israel's (old-new) Prime Minister. The event delineates how the Arab conflict and the perennial need of national security obstruct any change of mentality in Israeli politics, since the latter clearly showed its inherent conservatism. The question of who are the political actors able to take charge of the country's national interest is discussed in the next paragraph while focusing on the must qualities Israeli leaders should possess.

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[38] Such accusations by the Israeli prime Minister had increased due to the open criticism regarding the director-general of the Israel's Second Authority Broadcasting Company Shai Babad (July 2014). The latter resigned few months later in order to run in the Kulanu List for the Knesset.

[39] A full transcript of the interview is available on
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/21/obama-huffpost-interview-
 (last accessed .transcript_n_6905450.html (last accessed 19/06/17

The Antagonism of Political Actors. - Personal charisma is paramount in Israeli politics. Rarely do parties achieve wide popular support without a leading figure building up his (rarely hers) own charisma[40]. The personalization of politics is defined as "the more general, pervasive, and fundamental element in the process of change of electoral campaigns"[41] (Swanson & Mancini, 1996); a phenomenon which testify the «decline of social and partisan alignments occurred in almost every advanced industrial democracy [Israel is no different[42]] during the last decades [that] has in fact made way for short-term forces (e.g., candidates, issues, performance evaluations) to influence voting choices»[43]. Therefore, the process collocates the political weight in the hands of the individual actor [namely, the leader], while it diminishes the centrality of the political group (i.e., political party)[44]. Consequerntly, the personalization of politics transcends procedural democracy and its traditional, seemingly technical, agents as it configures voters in the image of rationality. However, personal charisma

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[40] Here comes to mind the thriving and vast literature by Max Weber. According to the German sociologist, charisma refers to an essentially "irrational", "magic-theological" component of action. Charismatic leadership can exist only as long as it is recognized by followers and rises in times of institutional crisis, social and cultural decline in order to radically put into question frameworks of the established order and to disrupt the stranglehold of bureaucratic organization and its codification of balances of power. It thus represents a source of change, embodied by the uniqueness of one and particular social agent, rather than a collective factor which contributes to the stratification and reproduction of the existent social order. Consequently, charisma is supposedly creative and innovative, while its social exploit shows the relevance of emotionality and extraodrinariy abilities. See M.Weber (2004): "The Vocation Lectures: Science as a Vocation" and "Politics as a Vocation", Indiananpolis: Cambridge, Hackett Publishing Company. Though it seems that the use of 'charisma' in Israei politics has little to do with Weberian literature, the concept is widely used in contemporary discourse, especially by Israeli media which attributes a kind of exceptionality to a specific leader (often described as 'populist'; see note 46).

[41] D. Swanson, P. Mancini, P. (1996): "*Politics, media, and modern democracy: An international study of innovations in electoral campaigning and their consequences*", Westport, CT: Praeger (especially, p.10).

[42] G. Rahat, T. Sheafer (2007): "The personalization(s) of politics: Israel: 1949–2003", *Political Communication*, N.24, pp. 65-80. The authors reveal the multifaceted phenomenon in Israeli politics by identifying three types of personalization: institutional, media-based and behavioral personalization.

[43] D.Garzia (2011): "The personalization of politics in Western democracies: Causes and consequences on leader-follower relationships", *The Leadership Quarterly* 22 (2011) pp. 697-709 (cit.p.698).

[44] This complex phenomenon is a result of the "dynamic interplay" of two factors: media-related thechnological innovations and the organizational changes within the political party-system. See idem.

also bestows responsibility upon the leader's own shoulders since it implies a high degree of trust and accountability. The leader's primary role is to be a spokesperson to the masses through a trustful (and supposedly direct) relationship. It is quite different from the more traditional, not to say functional and norm-based, image of a statesman; whose virtues are highly efficient in managing and supervising the executive and the public apparatus while serving the national interest[45]. The charismatic leader gains popular trust not by being a brilliant executor of normative procedures and technical policies but by putting voice in the mouths of the unprivileged; a supposedly genuine and solidary gesture.Most politicians, however, have become charisma-seeking individuals, especially in terms of consensus,reputation and image[46],thus they nurture the process of political personalization, (either of the centralized kind in the case of party-leaders or decentralized personalization which testifies the same process concerning individual politicians in relation to the distribution of power within political parties vis-à-vis leadership[47]. At any rate, the charisma-constructed personalized features of Israeli have become the main anchor of interpretation and evaluation in the political arena[48]. The importance of individual

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[45] The ideal-type distinction between a political leader and a statesperson is debatable. These categorial limits get somewhat blurred by history and nostalgia because many past public (political) figures are viewed today as the *Generation of Nephilim* (e.g. David Ben- Gurion, Chaim Weizmann, Ze'ev Jabotinsky, Menachem Begin, Yitzhak Rabin etc.).

[46] Beyond the abovementioned attribution of charisma, the critical aspect of democratic politics as the rule of law and functional administration reemerges. Notwithstondong, this last point suggests the "trivialization" of charisma- both because it is finally released from its mystic aura which has characterized it for a long time but also because it has become attributable in part to ordinary people solely as a result of their identification with certain social groups (namely, politicians). Hence, the use of charisma in describing Israeli politicians as consensus\reputation-seekers actually purifies the concept from its metaphysically magical and irrational components, while showing the dynamics of construction, protection and waterproofing of the boundaries of power groups made possible by the action of the leader and his followers. In other words, it reveals the oscillating twofold breadth of the attribuation between how leaders present themselves and how their purported followers perceive them; a dialectic in continuous need of clarification and novel empirical assesments. See D. McDonnell (2015): "Populist Leaders and Coterie Charisma", *Political Studies*, pp.1-15; and T.S.Pappas (2016): *"Are Populist Leaders Charismatic? The Evidence from Europe*", Constellations, pp.378–390.

[47] M.Balmas M, G. Rahat G, T. Sheafer, S.R. Shenhav SR (2014): "Two routes to personalized politics: Centralized and decentralized personalization", *Party Politics* [Internet version], 2014; 20:37.

[48] Yet, the phenomenon has a wider range, since it also rises a large-scale rapid political participation aimed at a variety of targets, from more traditional parties or candidates, to direct engagement with corporations, brands, and transnational policy forums. These

representatives not only stems from systemic changes (media and organizational transformations) but akso from the intensification of a rhetoric of action that has strongly entered the current political discourse. Tha latter refers to the fact that the image of the leader is that of a man of action who implies instant solutions for citizens' day-to-day problems; while consequently generating leaders' popularity amongst the former. Moreover, it often serves as an antidote against scandals and misdeeds committed by (even the same) politicians to whom such virtues are attributed. The 2015 Israeli general elections is a formidable example of how charisma is the name of the game in Israeli politics.

Incumbent Prime Minister Netanyahu won the elections against all odds[49]. Niether he and nor his competitor Isaac "Bougie" Herzog, chairman of the Labour Party, stepped out of the charisma-building campaign. Both adopted similar political strategies to celebrate their innate charismas. By doing so, their electoral "squabble" represented no novelty. Ideology was rarely mentioned during the campaign and the banalization of domestic unease (especially concerning welfare policies) and that of geopolitical security (i.e. the Iranian nuclear threat) further blurred ideological differences. Key-words such as «true leadership», «responsibility», «accountability» (the candidates' personal virtues), «national pride» and «security» (goals to be achieved) were much to be expected as in each and every electoral campaign. Therefore the last Israeli elections give us the opportunity to identify *personal charisma* as one of the ingredients which determine the formation of the Israeli «state of mind». This is exemplified by the political use the candidates made out of their own biographies. Both emphasized their "by-the-book" pedigrees.The two prominent Zionist family histories were engaged in the electoral campaign. Likud campaign videos reminded the electorate that Benjamin Netanyahu grew up in a Zionist home

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mobilizations often include a multitude of issues brought into the same protests " W.L. Bennett: "*The Personalization of Politics: Political Identity, Social Media, and Changing Patterns of Participation*", The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, Vol. 644, Issue 1, November 2012 (pp.20-39).

[49] The last opinion polls published four days before the Election Day outlined a four-seat advantage to the centre-left political alliance the *Zionist Union* (Hebrew: HaMahane HaZioni): 24 vs. 20 seats going to the Likud. The data is taken from an opinion poll published by Channel 10 (March 13th 2015; the poll consisted of 1203 adults (including 258 Israeli Arabs). The results should have been better hypothesized by experts who embarrassingly did not base the opinion polls on most Israelis' positive judgement about Netanyahu's suitability to govern (43% vs.35% of his opponent Isaac "Bougie" Herzog.

which made him follow his older brother's[50] footsteps in the IDF and later forged his deep commitment to Israel's national interest while serving as Israeli ambassador to the UN (1984-1988)[51].

A similar biography was offered by Isaac Herzog in his campaign for the Zionist Union. Jewish tradition, active Zionism, rich military experience and diplomatic skills were thus to determine the candidate's suitability to be elected prime-minister (assuming that such qualities pass down from one generation to the other).

Their antagonism consisted in mutual accusations of recklessness and ineptitude vis-à-vis social and economic difficulties and the precarious geopolitical situation. Though comparison between Netanyahu's and Herzog's biographies would be a legitimate mode to assess their political aptitude, the Israeli electorate had other worries which were focal elements during the electoral campaign.Fear of change serves as a powerful precondition for the ambiguous notion of the *people* to become an extraordinary tool in the hands of two political ideas: one is based on rational norms of democratic citizenship, the other on sentimental kinship.What is commonly known as populism - based upon the entire community of an authentic *heartland*[52]- is the union of these two evocative concepts. The result is the collocation of the first (democratic citizenship) within the second (the kinship connected to a specific 'heartland'), which engenders a sort of harmonious «territory of the imagination»[53], yet hostile towards external others (seen as dangerous rivals).

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[50] Yonatan "Yoni" Netanyahu (March 13, 1946-July 4, 1976) was an Israel Defense Forces officer who commanded the elite commando unit during Operation Entebbe (an operation to rescue hostages held at Entebbe Airport in Uganda in 1976). The mission was successful, with 102 of the 106 hostages rescued, but Netanyahu was killed in action and was celebrated as a war hero (especially as he was the only IDF fatality during the operation).

[51] As the electoral campaign was warming up Netanyahu's decision to address the US Congress on March 3rd, 2015 and declare opposition to the Iranian Nuclear Deal became a new example for his statesman-qualities. Some American politicians and media personalities (identified with the Republican Party, e.g.: Speaker of the United States House of Representatives John Boehner; House Representative Jason Chaffetz; TV and radio broadcaster Rush Limbaugh) compared Netanyahu's speech to the one delivered by British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, who similarly opposed the Munich Agreement (1938). The comparison was mainly based on the fact the two political figures were the only foreign leaders to address the US Congress in three different occasions. The analogy provoked open debates, both in the USA and Israel.

[52] The locution «heartland people» is adopted from Paul Taggart (2000), *Populism*, Buckingham, Open University Press.

[53] P. Taggart (2000), p. 95.

Not only does this *reciprocal exclusion of the concepts identity and alterity*[54] manifest a negative perception of the others, it may entail dangerous political behaviour as well. The precariousness of the ethnicity\culture-based socio-political fabric in Israel provides fertile grounds for populist stances to strengthen their hold, while democracy becomes an easy prey. Consequently, political preference also re-emerges in terms of sectorial voting beyond the already discussed legalistic discourse and personal charisma. The cleavage of ethnicity (embedded in culture and politics alike) thus become a key-factor to understand the political game. Since social cohesion and economic welfare seem to be at stake, each political force proclaims itself to be the paladin of a sectorlized, and often victimized, people; a rhetoric which adds to the aready inherent hyper-litigiousness of Israeli politics as the last electoral campaign surely exemplify. The sociological categories, namely Ashkenazi\Sephardic, religious\lay, centre\periphery, Left\Right, Jews\non-Jews, become instrumental in gaining popularity and support. This antagonistic ethnic variation within the 'Israeli people' determines many aspects of the country's political «state of mind».

Such a sectorial (and heavily personalized) antagonism was evident in the struggle for votes between the Sephardic ultraorthodox parties of Shas and Yachad (lit. Together). Shas, led by Aryeh Mahlouf Deri (chairman of Shas throughout the 1990s, former Minister of the Interior, convicted of bribery in 2000), faced its former chairman for almost 14 years, Eli Yishai, founder of Yachad. Yishai (former aide to Deri himself) left Shas following the death of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef in 2013 which had raised personal antagonisms amongst the late Rabbi's disciples, especially between the two aspiring leaders. Deri was successful in saving the party from failure[55] as he had framed his campaign by using the catchy "Mizrahi vote for Mizrahi!" slogan and by referring to Sephardi Israelis as the "invisible","nobody" people, neglected and marginalized by the prevalently Ashkenazi establishment. His campaign differentiated itself from that of Moshe Kahlon (it did not explicitly referred to the socio-economic unease experienced by the middle-class) as well as fro that of his opponent Eli Yishai who centred his campaign on the sole issue of the increasing number of clandestine

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[54] Taken from Francesco Remotti (2010), p. 6 (my translation)
[55] Shas won only 7 seats in the new Knesset; a sharp decrease in political power, if compared with the 11 MKs (members of Knesset) it had in the 19th Knesset.

immigrants living in downtown Tel-Aviv[56]. This clearly shows that a loud and clear electoral message - with clear references to both the ethnic and socio-cultural cleavages- was a real electoral winning card to play, especially against the somewhat elitistic persona of Yair Lapid, leader of Yesh Atid (whose father Yosef "Tommy" Lapid[57] was also a vocal opponent of Shas and other ultra-orthodox parties)[58].

Another heartland people was glorified by the Jewish Home charismatic leader Naftali Bennett (Netanyahu's Minister of Economy) who adopted a rather provocative slogan: «We stop apologizing, Israel's Right». His exaltation of the just national-religious people occupied the political void on the Right of the Likud which was much constrained to give an electoral fight to *Kulanu* rather than polemicize with Bennett. Nonetheless, Netanyahu's cries for help against the droves of Arab voters cannibalized the Jewish Home extreme-Right electorate; as Rightist voters had to save Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud. In addition, the loss of the Jewish Home's political autonomy became evident at the 20,000 people national\religious Right manifestation in Tel-Aviv on March 15th, where Netanyahu stole the show from Bennett as the central speaker. Although the Jewish Home did not succeed in preserving its electoral power (as it won only 8 seats in the new-elected Knesset), Naftali Bennett would remain a central figure in any Rightist coalition. This shows the increasing convergence of the messianic-nationalistic vision of Greater Israel and its consolidation as a central element in the Israeli 'state of mind'.

A more drastic electoral result was faced by Avigdor Lieberman's party *Yisrael Beitenu*. Pre-polls showed a rapid decrease in support. The latter predicted a decline of more than 50% in Knesset seats (4-5 seats out of the existing 11, or even a hypothetical disappearance). The sharp decrease in support was due to dissatisfaction and delusion, much felt by the party's traditional electorate. Suspicions about large-scale corruption (i.e. bribery and forgery) in the party's ranks increasingly rose and police investigations were constantly reported by the media. Furthermore, the so-called Extreme

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[56] Yachad failed to cross the electoral threshold (it received only 2.97% of the vote) and did not enter the new elected Knesset.

[57] Yosef Lapid (1931-2008) was a writer, a journalist and a politician who headed the secular-liberal party Shinui (lit. "Change") from 1999 to 2006.

[58] Noteworthy is the position of the Ashkenazi ultra-orthodox party Yahadut HaTora HaMeuhedet (lit. "United Torah Judaism") gained 6 seats in the 20th Knesset, after it had adopted a "non-sectorial" electoral campaign, basing it on social welfare and healthcare.

Right populist party[59] was unable to mobilize the historically loyal "Russian voice". In addition, the unsuccessful political alliance with the Likud (dissolved in July 2014 after less than two years) had left signs of panic and uncertainty. The extremely violent rhetoric endorsing death penalty legislation for Arab terrorists was too much for the electorate to follow Lieberman's decreasing charisma. One may even argue that the once self-referential Russian-speaking community in Israel has found its place in more general-led politics. Moreover, it seems to delineate a political shift in favour of the Likud as a sort of re-centralization process of Israeli Rightists[60]. That said, Yisrael Beitenu still won 6 seats and was capable of determining future political developments.

A parallel centralization-trend, though minor in scale, was felt in the inner-positioning of the Israeli Left. Social-democratic Zionist *Meretz* almost risked not passing the legal threshold because of the failing attempt to stipulate a surplus-vote agreement with the Arab Joint List (previously signed with the Zionist Union). Furthermore, a roughly overlapping electorate with both the Zionist Union and Yesh Atid almost "cannibalized" the Leftist party. Notwithstanding, and after a nerve-racking electoral campaign, Meretz did succeed in re-gaining the party's position in the Knesset (5 seats, only one seat less than the 6 it had won in the 2013 elections). This last point reveals that the initial objective of raising the electoral threshold did not really generate a less multi-polarized political system, since it did not cause the vanishing of the more ideological poles in Israeli politics (at least in the short term).

Very different was the electoral fortune of the Arab Joint List. Since the a-Zionist Arab political conglomerate was the result of the new legal threshold, controversies within the Arab leadership had to be placated (at least formally). Its electoral campaign (with videos broadcasted in Arabic followed by Hebrew subtitles) envisaged Israel as a pluralistic and prosperous democracy but did not miss the opportunity to underline the Jewish expropriation of lands from Palestinian hands. It was directly oriented against Netanyahu's anti-Arab policies. Nonetheless, the campaign did not lead to a significant shift in Israeli minorities' political preference

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[59] D.Filc, U. Lebel (2005): "The Post-Oslo Israeli Populist Radical Right in Comparative Perspective: Leadership, Voter Characteristics and Political Discourse", *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 10, No.1, pp. 85-97.

[60] Yet it is equally plausible that the fear of handing power to the Left was the factor which most influenced the Right-wing electorate to concentrate, rather than centralize, its vote.

(with approximately two mandates deriving from the Israeli Druze vote[61]). Though the Joint List gained momentum and enjoyed media coverage throughout the campaign, the 13 seats (446,583 votes) does not change its position in the Knesset. The electoral result does not erode the hegemonic stability of the Jewish-centred party system.The political achievement[62] simply suggests an ongoing demographic change as well as the strategic success in uniting the usually divided Arab voice under the same political roof.

The political enterprise of the Zionist Union, founded on December 10th 2014, may be summarized in the total lack of political finesse. The alliance between *HaAvoda* (the Israeli Labour Party) and *Hatnuah* (lit. The Movement)[63] did not really attract liberal Zionist peace-seeking voters around it. The centre-Left electorate viewed it as a mishmash of old-style opportunism (since Livni took part of Netanyahu's previous government) and a mere tactical and cynical operation vis-à-vis Yesh Atid[64] which meant no real ideological renewal[65]. The uncharismatic personalities of Isaac Herzog and Tzipi Livni with their somewhat technical discourses did not offer an appealing alternative to Netanyahu's rightist hegemony. Livni's choice to redraw from the premiership-on-rotation clause 24 hours prior to the opening of the ballots seemed to be a desparate move by the two leaders criticized for being indecisive. This "one step forward, two steps back" campaign discredited Herzog. His slogan «Responsibility, the foundation for leadership» was unconvincing and was further damaged by Tzipi Livni's absence during much of the campaign. But the fatal blow was yet to come. On March 7th, a mass Left-wing rally (circa 60-80,000 people) was organized in Rabin Square in Tel-Aviv. Its initiators called it «Israel Wants Change» and overtly supported the Zionist Union. The main speaker was

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[61] In the new-elected Knesset this minority is represented by three MPs: Dr. Abdullah Abu Ma'aruf (placed 13th in the Arab Joint list), Ayoob Kara (26th in the Likud List), and Hamad Amar (5th placed in Yisrael Beitenu).

[62] In the 19th Knesset the Arab electorate joined 11 seats which were divided as follows: 4 Ra'am-Ta'al+3 Balad+4 Hadash (including the Jewish Member of Knesset Dov Khenin).

[63] The party was founded in 2012 by Tzipi Livni (who left Kadima) seeking to form a more liberal centre in Israeli politics.

[64] Though Yesh Atid was viewed as an electoral threat able to "steal" centrist votes from the ones Hatnuah was claiming to bring to the Zionist Union, it did not succeed in maintaining electoral supportand won only 11 seats in the new Knesset (a sharp decline from the 19 it had won in 2013).

[65] The agreement to form the "Zionist Union" was followed by a wave of resignations of figureheads from Hatnua: former Major General Elazar Stern joined Yesh Atid, whereas Meir Sheetrit, Amram Mitzna and David Tzur retired from politics altogether.

former Director of Mossad Meri Dagan who heavily criticized Netanyahu's policies. However, the fervent support did not put out the provocation caused by artist Yair Garbuz in his opening speech. He called for an all-citizens Israeli democracy while referring to Mizrahi Israelis (the Sephardi), religious people and Right-voters as primitive, ignorant, corrupted and extremist. The speech broght about a wide range of political reactions. Accusations of elitism and racism were not appeased, as the political couple Herzog and Livni were immediately identified with Garbuz's views and consequently depicted as two elitist Ashkenazis. In other words, political miscalculations, lack of charisma and on-the-paper popularity hindered solid electoral support and placed the Zionist Union second largest party in the Knesset (with 24 seats).

5. *Conclusions: A tricky political «state of mind»?*

Following the scope conditions the article laid out, it seems that the 2015 general elections in Israel did not change the country's political "self". The issue of security was still perceived in geopolitical terms and rapidly liquidated the former's interpretation as welfare, which had its origin in the social protests of 2011. National security is still predominant in determining Israeli vote. The menacing "others" (i.e. the Arab population) still dictate the priorities in Israelis' own political mind-sets. In addition, the waves of legalistic discourse about norms and practices have declined vis-à-vis the increasing personalization of party politics, chiefly based on claims of charismatic suitability to govern. The latter confirms the presence of demagoguery as well as what may be categorized as populistic stances. Political leaderships adopt and adapt old commonplaces and slogans to gain electoral consensus rather than to provide ideological alternatives to the country's precarious socio-cultural status quo. The indicator to this is the almost gossip-like campaign that emphasized neither the role the two candidates aspired to, nor their parties. It was equally evident in the many identity-based antagonisms which manipulated sociological categories such as ethnicity, religion and socio-economic background. The institutional reform of the Knesset's legal threshold appears to have played only a partial role in determining representation in the Israeli parliament. The latter is still remains much multipolar and fragmented, as it reflects the sectorial nature of voting preferences. Nonetheless, it did generate some inclusive alliances between minor parties (i.e. the Arab Joint List and the Zionist Union). Despite political shifts and intrigues, the electoral results attest the weight and fragility of Israeli socio-cultural fabric as determinants of what may seem to be an almost omnipresent socio-political conservatism. In more

general terms, the paper deploys the concept of «state of mind» - which has not yet been used to contextualize singular political events (such as elections) - by matching the latter with more common conceptual frameworks (namely identity, habitus but also discourse, ideology etc.). Its aim is to bridge the gaps between long-rage political trajectory and specific events without diminishing the importance of multi-factorial and processual analyses. The adaptation of the traditional use of «state of mind», focused on perceptions and values, seems to further solidify the more traditional sociopolitical analysis of elections while delineating the connection between political culture and political practices. It unpacks the observable and delimitable time span with its specificities, yet excludes no long-term processual trends. It invites us to reconstruct events as they take form. The selected case of Israel may benefit from its usage, since the complexities of the country's political fabric reflect broader phenomena which assume concrete visibility, especially in the dense and eventful period of general elections.