

Another Israeli Election Down to the Wire

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

On February 10, Israelis will go to the polls to choose a new government, and the election campaigning -- curtailed by Israel's military operation in the Gaza Strip -- has resumed in earnest. The abbreviated campaign may explain why an estimated 30 percent of Israelis are undecided, a very high figure for a country that prides itself on political awareness. Although Likud leader Binyamin Netanyahu maintains a steady lead, he cannot be certain of victory, given the high undecided figure, and foreign minister and Kadima party head Tzipi Livni could still eke out a win.

Current Polls

According to various polls, a coalition of parties (including some religious) led by the center-right Likud Party is projected to win 65 seats in the 120-member Knesset (Israeli parliament), more than the 61 needed for a majority. The gap, however, between the two largest parties -- Likud and Kadima -- is narrow. The ruling centrist Kadima Party is running three seats behind Likud, twenty-eight to twenty-five. By Israeli custom, Israel's president asks the party with the most seats to form a coalition. If Livni's Kadima overtakes Likud, she hopes to persuade both a combination of large parties and right-leaning religious parties to cement her coalition. This would be Livni's second attempt to form a government, having failed in fall 2008, following Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's resignation (Olmert then stayed on as a caretaker until the election).

Why is the Right Wing Ahead?

Given his front-runner status, Netanyahu has taken a risk-averse approach. He has largely avoided the media and has pointedly refused to debate his main opponents, Livni and Defense Minister and Labor leader Ehud Barak. As such, Netanyahu has been able to avoid questions about how, as prime minister in 1998, he authorized a backchannel with Syria that discussed yielding the entire Golan Heights and how that squares with his support for holding onto the Golan today. He has also not explained his sweeping declaration that Iran will not be allowed to go nuclear.

Likud is leading for several reasons. First, Hamas's rocket fire on Israeli cities since Israel's 2005 withdrawal from Gaza, which has sharply escalated since Hamas's electoral victory in 2006, seems to be pushing Israelis to the right and making them less amenable to future territorial withdrawals. (Palestinians say Israeli retaliation has the same impact on the Palestinian body politic.) Livni and Barak advocate for further withdrawals, coupled with strict security arrangements. They argue that this will create a basis for a two-state solution, which will ultimately make Israel more secure. In contrast, the right points to Gaza as proof that withdrawals will make Israel more vulnerable. Moreover, Netanyahu has promised cooperation among Likud, Kadima, and Labor following the election. This exhortation for unity seems to comfort the public amid concerns that a purely right-leaning government like the one he headed in the late 1990s could mean confrontation with the United States.

Second, the Israeli public is receptive to the right wing's argument that Israel did not go far enough in the recent military campaign in Gaza. Both Netanyahu and Avigdor Lieberman, head of the Yisrael Beiteinu Party, have argued that the Israel Defense Forces should have toppled Hamas, particularly given the terrorist organization's poor performance in the conflict. Since the Gaza offensive, Lieberman's right-wing party has soared from ten to sixteen seats in the polls. (Lieberman, an immigrant from the former Soviet Union, has also benefited from an ill-timed, election-eve police investigation about campaign finance contributions. The timing of the move reinforced doubts among some of the one million Russian immigrants that the Israeli establishment is "persecuting" them.)

Third, the global recession is approaching Israel, a point made by Bank of Israel head Stanley Fischer in remarks last week. Netanyahu has sought to position himself as an experienced former finance minister (he served in the post from 2003 to 2005) who is best positioned to navigate the choppy waters. In retort, Livni is belatedly arguing that it was precisely Netanyahu's unbridled free-market approach that led to many of the excesses on Wall Street, something Israel cannot afford.

Livni's Approach

Livni has a three-part strategy. First, she casts her election in very fateful terms, stating that Israel cannot afford to abandon peace efforts. When asked about the impact of a Netanyahu victory, Livni declared in an extensive interview with Haaretz that "Israel will lose the chance to advance a process [with the Palestinians] that can preserve it as a Jewish and democratic state. The [Likud] will say: terrorism first. They will say: the economy first. And it will wobble this way and wobble that way and it won't happen. The significance will be felt in the long term, but the missed opportunity will take place immediately. It's dramatic. It's the difference between hope and the loss of hope."

Second, Livni portrays herself as an uncorrupt politician. When Prime Minister Olmert was forced to step down amid a swirl of corruption allegations, the Israeli electorate identified character as the overriding issue. In that context, Livni shined. She seeks to depict herself as Israel's Barack Obama, who represents clean politics. Her posters proclaim her "a different" or alternative prime minister, using a Hebrew phrase that emphasizes that she is a woman. Unfortunately for Livni, the Israeli political landscape has changed with the recent conflict, and this argument carries less weight than it did just a few months ago.

Third, Livni presents herself as the toughest decisionmaker in the cabinet, since polls now show that security issues predominate. Believing that the Israeli electorate is not accustomed to seeing a woman in this role, Livni emphatically makes the point in interviews that she did not want to stop the fighting in Gaza. She is seeking to draw a contrast to Ehud Barak, who favored halting the fighting earlier in response to an appeal from France. In feisty interviews, Livni rejects the idea that Netanyahu and Barak have more experience because they each served as prime minister, noting that their respective tenures ended in failure.

In addition, in her bid to demonstrate toughness on Gaza, Livni has engaged in an ongoing, high-profile spat with Barak, accusing him of not responding aggressively enough to ongoing rocket fire by non-Hamas groups in Gaza. She has also charged that the ceasefire that Barak is trying to broker with Egypt will legitimize Hamas. For his part, Barak notes that Egypt is the key to improving efforts to interdict and halt the smuggling that could replenish Hamas's arsenal of rockets. Barak has accused Livni of seeking to politicize decisionmaking over Gaza. Livni, not surprisingly, rejects this characterization, making the case that the other members of Israel's security establishment feel a ceasefire could tie Israel's hands in retaliating against Hamas violations.

Conclusion

Livni is seeking to demonstrate that a woman can be a tough leader in tough times. She may hope that this approach will draw votes from the right, while garnering approval from Labor

supporters as well, as she seeks to demonstrate that Barak is too hesitant in taking strong action. Yet this tactic carries the risk that she will be seen as politicizing the Gaza issue for her own political benefit.

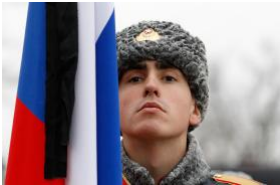
Livni's arguments are more likely to win the day if they are made on security grounds and can withstand the inevitable political recriminations. But the very nature of this highly charged, truncated political season suggests that solutions for Gaza, including the U.S. role in such efforts, are likely to begin in earnest only after the Israeli election and the formation of the next government. With Hamas leaders in Tehran trying to win support for Gaza reconstruction, however, time is very limited.

David Makovsky is a senior fellow and director of The Washington Institute's [Project on the Middle East Peace Process \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=16&newActiveSubNav=Project%20on%20the%20Middle%20East%20Peace%20Process&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D16&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=16&newActiveSubNav=Project%20on%20the%20Middle%20East%20Peace%20Process&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D16&newActiveNav=researchPrograms)



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