

## Israeli Politics: A Guide for the Perplexed

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On September 20, 2008, Isaac Herzog and David Makovsky addressed The Washington Institute's annual Weinberg Founders Conference. Mr. Herzog is Israel's minister of welfare and social services, as well as minister of the diaspora, society, and the fight against anti-Semitism. Mr. Makovsky is a senior fellow at the Institute and director of its [Project on the Middle East Peace Process \(/templateI02.php?](#)

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The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Isaac Herzog

Israel's political system is very different from America's. The Israeli idea of a political coalition, for example, is not well understood in the United States. Israeli society is not cohesive -- several prominent groups are constantly vying for their share of power, particularly the secular, modern orthodox, ultraorthodox, Russian immigrant, and Israeli Arab constituencies. The parliament's (Knesset) members represent a wide array of political persuasions, from left-wing Arabs who want to eliminate the Jewish nature of the state to far-right members who want to rid Israel of Arabs. As a result, many interesting alliances have emerged over the years. The kind of pragmatic cooperation that one sees in the United States between Senators John McCain and Joseph Lieberman is quite common in Israel. For instance, Ehud Barak of the Labor Party and Binyamin Netanyahu of the Likud Party have been close friends since their years in the army, although one might not guess this based on their public personas.

The current governing coalition between the Kadima Party and the Labor Party is strong and has been well managed by outgoing prime minister Ehud Olmert of Kadima. It has overcome many challenges, such as the second Lebanon war and accusations of corruption against Olmert. It has also overseen indirect talks with Syria, expanded talks with the Palestinians, and maintained sound economic policy.

What does the immediate future hold? Tzipi Livni has just won Kadima's primary election by a very small margin over Shaul Mofaz and will most likely become the next prime minister. Although Olmert will probably submit his formal resignation tomorrow, he will continue to serve as prime minister until a new one is sworn in. This means he could remain in power until next March if Livni is unable to form a government -- a scenario that would require a new round of national elections. Although Olmert's caretaker administration will retain full authority on paper, many fear that the government will be unable to make important decisions while Olmert is still in charge.

The Labor Party is the key to Livni's ability to form a coalition. There are some in Labor who would rather force elections -- they do not believe a prime minister should be chosen based on a 400-vote margin in a Kadima primary, arguing that the general public should have a say. At the same time, early elections could be dangerous for Labor: in the public's view, the party has not separated its political agenda from that of Kadima. In fact, Labor -- Israel's founding political party -- could disappear if the elections do not go its way, and this fear looms over party members.

It remains to be seen whether Livni can form a government with Labor and move ahead with a joint agenda for the next two years. She has up to forty-two days to form a new government. If she cannot, and general elections are held, Likud's Netanyahu may emerge victorious: he is currently leading in the polls, and his tough rhetoric appeals to Israelis.

David Makovsky

Tzipi Livni has three political tasks ahead of her. First, she must solidify Kadima's ranks after the party's primary election and bring Shaul Mofaz's supporters back into the fold. Livni won by a very narrow margin, and some Mofaz supporters assert that the primary result would have been different had the media not begun announcing exit poll results before the balloting actually concluded. In addition, voting divided along ethnic lines, with Ashkenazi (European origin) Jews overwhelmingly supporting Livni, and Mizrahi (Middle Eastern origin) Jews supporting Mofaz. Livni could try to repair the rift by promising an important cabinet position to Mofaz or another prominent Mizrahi if Mofaz follows through on his announced intention to take a "time out" from politics.

Second, despite the differences between Kadima and Labor, the two parties are the core of the governing coalition, and Livni must acknowledge Labor's importance in sustaining that coalition. Foreign political observers easily can make the broad conclusion that Labor would never choose early elections under current conditions. Yet, as Minister Herzog mentioned, there is at least one reason that astute Israeli pundits can point to as to why the party might do so.

Third, Livni must consider which other parties she wants to join the government. The easiest approach would be to replicate the current coalition, including the Pensioners Party and Shas. Yet, even if a coalition can be built in the near term, the longer-term question is whether both Labor and Kadima can survive. In other words, can Israel afford two peace parties? If Livni and Ehud Barak do not put aside their bickering, the moderate camp may split instead of uniting, which would benefit Netanyahu.

One factor that could favor Livni is the slate of municipal elections scheduled for November. Kadima has a chance to do well in those elections -- they will be held while Livni is still enjoying a political honeymoon of sorts, and the Knesset allocation system for municipal seats favors the party that won the previous elections (i.e., Kadima). If Kadima does emerge victorious, more Israelis will begin to view the phenomenon as more than fleeting, which will in turn boost Livni's political fortunes.

Labor's objections notwithstanding, Livni does have the moral legitimacy to lead. Kadima came to power not because of Olmert's merits, but because voters supported the policies of the relatively new party. Such support weakens the potential argument by Netanyahu that Livni was not elected by the people, because the people already elected her party. In any event, Livni will face a number of formidable policymaking constraints even if she is successful at building a coalition. On the Palestinian front, Livni's coalition may not be able to bear the pressures of

a renewed peace process if negotiations are approached as an all-or-nothing deal. For example, Shas refuses to support any prime minister who is willing to negotiate on Jerusalem. Yet, some have argued that the historic decision to relinquish part of Jerusalem should be made only by a government composed mainly of Jews, which would make it politically difficult to exclude Shas in favor of Israeli Arab parties.

Regarding Syria, much uncertainty surrounds the notion of a viable outcome in a new round of peace talks between Damascus and Israel. Nevertheless, Israel believes it is a proposition worth testing. Indirect talks in Turkey could last indefinitely, but they will not produce a successful outcome without U.S. efforts to wean Syria away from Iran.

Much uncertainty also surrounds the question of whether Livni's first diplomatic test will come on the Palestinian or the Syrian track. As with many previous Israeli leaders, her first challenge will likely take the form of a security crisis. For example, if the Gaza ceasefire is violated, will she continue to respect its terms or retaliate against Hamas? How will she handle the Iranian nuclear issue? And what about Hizballah? A security crisis, perhaps not of her choosing, could enable her to demonstrate her mettle to the Israeli public. At the same time, the lessons of the 2006 Lebanon war are difficult to ignore -- any military moves that are not well thought out in advance can have lasting deleterious consequences, as was the case for Olmert. Therefore, how Livni handles crises early on could determine whether she is viewed as an interim figure on the Israeli political scene or as a more permanent part of the political firmament.

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