

Israel Goes to the Polls

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Brief Analysis

On March 16, 2006, Yaron Deckel and David Makovsky addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Mr. Deckel is a leading political analyst in Israel and Washington correspondent for Israel Television and Israel Radio. Mr. Makovsky is a senior fellow and director of the Project on the Middle East Peace Process at The Washington Institute. Mr. Makovsky's remarks were released in [PolicyWatch no. 1086, "The Shape of Israel's Election Race." \(templateC05.php?CID=2451\)](#) The following is a rapporteur's summary of Mr. Deckel's remarks.

In several recent interviews with the press, Israeli acting prime minister Ehud Olmert articulated a specific agenda for disengagement and the evacuation of thousands of additional settlers from the West Bank, distinguishing his campaign from the vague promises that have characterized past Israeli elections. Ariel Sharon campaigned in 2003 on eventual "deep and painful" future concessions, but did not specifically address disengagement until after the elections. It is therefore important to evaluate the prospect that Kadima will head the next government and what policies it would likely follow if in power.

Election Prospects

The weakening campaigns of Labor and Likud have virtually ensured that Olmert will head the next government. Israelis have shown that they do not trust Labor Party leader Amir Peretz because of his lack of experience, and they do not trust Likud leader and former Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu because of his experience. Peretz has misplaced confidence in the salience of economic issues, and his single-issue campaign has failed to catch up with the more urgent issues of national and regional security. Netanyahu's strategy is based on portraying support for Kadima as support for the 1967 ceasefire lines, but his recent efforts to establish a bloc -- with Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu and the ultraorthodox Shas -- before the elections was a mistake. A more beneficial strategy for both Netanyahu and Peretz would have been to brand themselves not as potential winners, but as potentially influential partners in a Kadima-led government.

Hamas's victory in January Palestinian parliamentary elections has not had the effect on Israeli politics that some expected: a rightward shift due to increased popular support for a strong leader, such as Netanyahu, who could deal with the threat. Instead, Israelis have proven their exhaustion with the traditional parties of Likud and Labor. Additionally, for thirteen years Israelis have been frustrated by the lack of a reliable Palestinian partner: from Yasser Arafat to Abu Mazen to, now, a Hamas-led government. Olmert has capitalized on this dissatisfaction with a largely unilateral decisionmaking strategy.

The March 14 operation in Jericho should be viewed as part of Olmert's strategy to boost Kadima's popularity for the elections on March 28. Olmert's competitors rightly viewed the Jericho operation as a serious advance for Kadima. Netanyahu, for example, met with former minister of foreign affairs Moshe Arens and other veteran security and foreign affairs officials immediately following news of the operation in an effort to reestablish his national security image.

A Kadima-led coalition government could take several forms. With "floating" voters accounting for about eighteen

Knesset seats, the final composition of the coalition is not yet decided. Kadima will almost certainly ask Labor to join in its government, and will only partner with Likud if Netanyahu quits. Olmert likely wants to form a coalition with the Labor Party, Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu, and the ultraorthodox parties of United Torah Judaism and Shas. However, that would not be the only option open to Kadima. Indeed, depending on the exact outcome on March 28, it is even possible that Olmert could form a coalition excluding both Likud and Labor. In addition, Olmert's selection of defense minister will be crucial: Shaul Mofaz, Ehud Barak, Dan Merridor, and Ami Ayalon are all potential candidates.

Policies of an Olmert Government

Should Olmert lead the next government, he will most likely replace many of Sharon's former advisors. He has also shown that he will take on a more proactive approach to disengagement than Sharon, envisioning a comprehensive, one-stage, military and civilian evacuation. However, Olmert's implementation of a second disengagement will depend on his ability to convince Israelis that he is a strong leader who prioritizes a secure, Jewish-majority state. For his part, Netanyahu has done a service to Israeli democracy in stating publicly that the elections will represent a referendum on the division of Israeli land, indicating he will accept any result. Should Olmert win, this will give him an unprecedented mandate as prime minister.

In order to implement a future disengagement of tens of thousands of settlers, Olmert must obtain the credibility on matters of security that Sharon had. The next stages of disengagement will form a large part of his legacy: if he succeeds in carrying out the popular agenda, he could be reelected. In addition, Olmert will most likely negotiate with the settlers, unlike Sharon, who made the mistake of forgetting their support. While their leadership is extremist, finding common language with them could be difficult. Olmert's success will also depend on the next Knesset's numbers: any "leftist" plan will be automatically opposed by Likud and the extreme right. Also likely to oppose such a plan would be two potential partners in Olmert's cabinet that traditionally side with right-wing voters: Shas and Yisrael Beiteinu, which are projected to have about twenty-one seats. This formidable bloc of center-right members in the Knesset could allow Netanyahu to rally the opposition against Olmert to prevent "another Hamas victory."

Olmert can be expected to continue to work closely with the United States, having already discussed with Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni the division of responsibility, delegating all non-U.S. relations to her. He can be expected to appoint a new ambassador to the United States. Unlike Sharon, who asked the United States for assistance after the decision for disengagement was published, Olmert will first ask the Bush administration for help.

Olmert faces the daunting task of forging the loose group of centrists that currently compose Kadima into a permanent political party. Centrist parties in Israel have suffered a hard fate, and the original purpose of Kadima, specifically, was centered on Sharon's reelection. Without Sharon, if the governing coalition shows the first signs of failing, its members may return to their old parties.

◆ This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Diana Greenwald.

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