

# Israel's Labor Party Likely to Choose New Face

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## Brief Analysis

**T**omorrow, approximately 100,000 members of the Israeli Labor Party will vote for their new leader. The winner will serve as the party's standard-bearer for the national elections on January 28, 2003. Barring an unforeseen turnaround, the winner of tomorrow's contest will be Haifa mayor Amram Mitzna. Binyamin Ben-Eliezer—Mitzna's main rival and, until his recent resignation from the Sharon government, Israel's defense minister—is reduced to hoping that he can deprive Mitzna of the required 40 percent needed in a three-person race and force a December 3 runoff. Even under that scenario, however, Mitzna is expected to win. His popularity has grown over the past week as key supporters of the race's third candidate, veteran politico Haim Ramon, have defected to his side in the hopes of blocking Ben-Eliezer's reelection. Polls of Labor members currently show Mitzna ahead of Ben-Eliezer by a 43 percent to 26 percent margin, with Ramon trailing both at 12 percent.

This race is significant for two reasons in particular. First, Mitzna's popularity illustrates new trends in the Labor Party. Second, even though Labor is expected to lose in the January 28 national elections, the odds are that the Likud Party will ask Labor to form a new national unity government. Thus, Labor's leadership and policies will be a factor in determining the direction of the new government; Likud has traditionally turned to Labor during difficult times, believing that a broad-based government provides national cohesion and insulates it from potential U.S. pressure.

## Mitzna's Appeal and Policies

Mitzna has no previous cabinet experience, and in this sense his election would be a first for Labor. His appeal seems to stem from other sources. First is his personal style and background; the 57-year-old son of German immigrants has a squeaky clean record and is known for his informality. Labor's voting base is traditionally Ashkenazic (European origin), as is its leadership, and Mitzna's roots are therefore a plus for this constituency. Mitzna also served thirty years in the Israel Defense Forces, rising to the rank of general; his service included heading the Central Command (West Bank) during the first intifada in the late 1980s. Since Labor favors territorial concessions, the party tends to seek generals for its leadership (e.g., Yitzhak Rabin, Ehud Barak) in order to persuade the public that yielding land is safe. (It should be noted that the mixing of the political and military elite in Labor actually predates Israel's presence in the territories, characterizing even the first twenty-nine years of Israel's existence, when Labor was the country's only governing party.)

Mitzna's nine-year track record as a mayor is another plus. During last week's three-way televised debate, Ben-

Eliezer and Ramon criticized his lack of national experience, but the public seems to like the fact that Mitzna has successfully managed Israel's third-largest city, particularly given Haifa's large Arab population. Mitzna is viewed as a good manager, an important attribute in light of the managerial problems that plagued former prime minister Ehud Barak before he was defeated early last year. Barak was considered intellectually brilliant, with a sterling military record, but the scope of his defeat was linked in part to poor managerial skills, not just Palestinian violence.

Mitzna's economic background is especially important given that Israel's per capita gross national product is shrinking for the third year in a row. Moreover, Israeli businessmen have spearheaded Mitzna's campaign, a noteworthy move for an interest group that has not served a prominent role in Labor despite being traditionally supportive of the party. Mitzna's success could signify this group's coming of age. He has broken new ground in Israeli campaigns by saying that the economy will not improve significantly so long as Israel controls more than 3 million Palestinians. Traditionally, Israeli leaders have shied away from overtly stating this link, believing that it could only hurt Israel's bargaining position at the negotiating table. Ironically enough, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said something comparable last week in a bid to blunt attacks from his own rival Binyamin Netanyahu, as the latter asserted that he could improve the Israeli economy despite the ongoing violence.

Mitzna's appeal also stems from the fact that he seems to be modifying Labor's peace policies to a certain degree. A key reason why Labor has been decimated in national polls is that it is identified as the "Oslo" party, as dupes of Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat. In some ways, Mitzna is striking a note of continuity in saying that he would negotiate with the Palestinians. Yet, he is also proposing a back-up strategy if such negotiation proves impossible. Mitzna has identified himself as being part of the movement for disengagement from the territories, stating that he would, if necessary, pull out of Gaza entirely and out of parts of the West Bank. In contrast, Ben-Eliezer opposes a unilateral pullout, saying that it would be a gift to Arafat. Another key opponent of disengagement is Shimon Peres, who argues that the idea does not promote peace. Yet, popular opinion in Labor certainly favors disengagement, thus breaking from the Ben-Eliezer and Peres approach. Ramon is even more of a disengagement advocate than Mitzna, believing that even the offering of negotiations is a waste of time; his dismal showing is chalked up to other factors (e.g., not having Mitzna's personal qualities or management skills; alienating party elders due to the manner in which he broke up the Histadrut trade-union power base).

### Mitzna's Challenges

Despite all of Israel's current economic and security woes, polls show that if elections were held today, Likud would almost double its strength and reach 36 seats in the 120-member Knesset, while Labor would drop from 26 seats to 19. Once Likud's religious and other right-wing allies are factored in, Likud's coalition strength would stand at 66 seats, giving it more than the number required to hold a governing majority. Thus, Mitzna will face great challenges leading up to the national elections even as he campaigns on the need to end the stalemate on the West Bank and Gaza as an economic imperative. His opponent will probably be Sharon, who is expected to defeat Netanyahu in the November 28 Likud primary.

Mitzna's chief vulnerability may lie in his failure to offer a reassessment of Oslo as he seeks to forge a future course for Israel. His past claims that he would negotiate with Arafat immediately if necessary have led to public criticism. Mitzna has responded to this criticism by adopting Sharon's formulation that Arafat is irrelevant, saying that he looks forward to negotiating with others. Even today, however, Mitzna does not disavow dealing with Arafat. Moreover, the elections might be coming too soon for Mitzna. That is, if a war in Iraq were somehow completed by January 28, Israeli elections could be held amid hopes that radicalism was in disarray. Yet, Israelis may well have to go to the polls with gas masks in hand—with figures such as Saddam Husayn and Arafat still looming large and terrorist killings continuing unabated.

During the last decade, terror during election campaigns has translated into a rightward shift by the Israeli

electorate. In order to prevent such a shift in January, Egypt has quietly sought to negotiate a Hamas ceasefire, as it has done during the last three Israeli election campaigns. Last week, Cairo hosted talks between Fatah and Hamas, and varying reports have surfaced regarding the results of these meetings. Some reports have said that Hamas would halt attacks against Israeli civilians, implying that this ceasefire does not apply to Israeli soldiers and settlers. Indeed, within a day of this announcement, Palestinian Islamic Jihad took responsibility for the killing of eleven Israeli soldiers and settlers in Hebron.

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