

Assessing Barak's Election Gambit

by [David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

Dec 13, 2000

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations.



Brief Analysis

Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak's surprise resignation Saturday night has plunged the country's already battered political system into further turmoil, and so far, his gambit seems to have failed. Barak's move was clearly designed, at least in part, to utilize a provision in Israeli law that would sideline his once and would-be opponent Benjamin Netanyahu from running in a special election for prime minister on February 6. Moreover, Barak hoped that by avoiding a general election, he could avert the reconfiguration of the Knesset since polls show that if elections were held today, it would become a more rightward-leaning body.

While polls have shown Barak trailing Netanyahu by twenty points, he is preferred when voters are asked to assess the candidate's personal moral character and integrity. Yet any attempt by Barak to exclude Netanyahu from the race, just days after saying that such a maneuver would be cowardly and never crossed his mind, could hurt him among undecided voters. Whether or not the Knesset is dissolved, Barak's resignation strategy will have incurred a political price.

Indeed, today the Knesset passed a preliminary rendering of a bill (by a 67 to 35 margin) that will enable Netanyahu to run for the premiership, with the only question remaining whether the Knesset will dissolve itself on December 18 or amend the law that restricts candidates in a special premiership election to current Knesset members, avoiding a parliamentary election.

Elections — Just for Premier or General Elections? The move to amend the direct election law in order to permit a citizen (e.g., Netanyahu) to run for prime minister quickly gathered steam, forcing Washington to support the measure. However, a key opponent of this amendment is Netanyahu himself. He and his supporters prefer the dissolution of the Knesset, hoping to take advantage of popular disillusionment with Barak's handling of the ongoing violence to build a comfortable governing majority. Under law, if the Knesset is not dissolved, only MKs (members of Knesset) that are already in office are eligible for the premiership in an election that is held sixty days later.

The key to the dissolution of the Knesset is the same party that has held the balance of power in Israel for much of the last decade — the Sephardi/Religious Shas Party. Shas would like to have Netanyahu back in power for two reasons. First, its grassroots are hawkish; second, the party profited greatly from the state's largesse during the Netanyahu years. Yet Shas does not want early elections because, as polls indicate, many of its North African voters could swing back to the Likud. This would reflect the shift of the agenda for this election back to war and peace and

away from issues which competed for attention in 1999, such as secular-religious and socio-economic questions. Therefore, a "Netanyahu law" fix would enable Shas to have it both ways. However, the past has demonstrated that Shas does not always succeed in resisting hawkish pressures.

Barak's Electoral Considerations While the fear of landslide defeat has Laborites instinctively opposing general elections, Barak needs to look at two countervailing factors as well. Should Barak win in a special election for premiership, he will likely find himself atop the same sort of deadlocked government that has existed for months. In the 1996 and 1999 elections, both conducted under the direct election law, candidates for the top post neglected the Knesset vote. This has been at their peril. Netanyahu's Knesset majority collapsed after two and a half years in power, and Barak's majority collapsed after eighteen months.

Yet, there is another reason Barak should be concerned with a prime ministerial election as opposed to a general election. A special election for prime minister would mark the first time that Israeli Arabs would be asked to vote for a Zionist candidate without also having the opportunity to cast a ballot for their own party list. (Of course, if an Arab candidate runs for premiership, as is possible, this scenario would not hold unless there was a runoff.) Israeli Arabs are considered to be angry with Barak over his government's tough handling of Israeli Arab protest riots at the start of the current Palestinian uprising. Nonetheless, Barak is going to want to court this constituency assiduously, even though this group is more likely to come out in a general rather than special election.

Internal Leadership Challenges Whatever the scope of the election, it is fair to say that the compressed timetable of the campaign works to the advantage of the front-runners. Within a day of his announcement, the Labor Central Committee endorsed Barak as its candidate, thereby preempting internal challenges from dovish elements. While a run by former premier Shimon Peres is still technically feasible, it is not deemed likely. The appearance of Netanyahu as an opponent has helped lead to this closing of ranks in the Labor Party.

On the Likud side, it decided yesterday to hold its internal election on December 19, timed to come on the heels of what it hopes will be the dissolution of the Knesset on December 18 (candidates must submit their names forty-eight days before balloting, or by December 21). Netanyahu is the likely victor, but Likud leader MK Ariel Sharon has not bowed out of the race so far, although there is a distinct possibility he will do so. In any event, Netanyahu is counting on a quick victory and on avoiding a lengthy contest before the national campaign begins. (In the event general elections are agreed upon, the Likud is expected to pick its Knesset slate by December 20. Labor's internal primary is also expected to be soon.)

Impact on the Peace Process Palestinian Authority chairman Yasir Arafat's official reaction to Barak's announcement has been that the Israeli election campaign puts the peace process on hold. In fact, the election was precipitated by Barak's decision to go to the Camp David summit in July. At that moment, Barak's coalition crumbled. Since then, the Al-Aqsa intifada further undermined Barak's efforts to create a set of ad hoc political arrangements that would enable him to govern without a Knesset majority.

Barak's aides think a peace agreement could help him win the election, and there has been a flurry of contacts this week — including secret efforts coordinated by French foreign minister Hubert Vedrine — to test whether some sort of a deal is possible. Clearly, Barak hopes that the early deadlines of an election coupled with the specter of the return of Netanyahu will concentrate Arafat's mind about the price the Palestinians will pay in not doing a deal with Israel. There are indications to suggest Barak's resignation was also designed to force Arafat's hand during the waning days of the Clinton Administration, which has been intimately involved with the peace process, rather than allowing him to delay several months while the Bush Administration gets organized. Israeli foreign minister Shlomo Ben-Ami said that Clinton is likely to visit the region before the Israeli election. However, there are some Palestinians who believe a Netanyahu victory will ultimately serve Palestinian interests — that it will engender sympathy in the international community, especially as the Palestinians seek European recognition for a unilateral

declaration of independence. If Arafat does head for a deal now, he will need to be careful not to act like the "kingmaker" of Israeli politics. Palestinians will be tempted to overreach, imposing stiff terms that would make Barak vulnerable to attacks that he is signing a deal to lift his sagging electoral fortunes rather than focusing on the good of the country.

Even if a peace deal is not reached at this moment of heightened regional tension, the upcoming election is likely to be more focused on war and peace than balloting in the recent past. Netanyahu will charge that there is a peace paradox, arguing that Barak's generous offer at Camp David encouraged Arabs to use violence as a tool to win even more concessions. In contrast, Barak will likely charge that amid the continuing violence, a Netanyahu victory will make it more likely that the region will slide to war.

David Makovsky is a senior research fellow at The Washington Institute.

Policy #299

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)