

Impact of the Israeli Election:

View from Washington

by [Thomas Donilon \(/experts/thomas-donilon\)](/experts/thomas-donilon)

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Brief Analysis

Adapting U.S. Policy for the New Israeli Government

Paul Wolfowitz: U.S. policies should not change every time a new government is elected in Israel. U.S. policymakers have become too invested in the internal politics of foreign countries, in particular Israel and Russia. The United States should support the policies of foreign governments that are consistent with U.S. interests and oppose those policies that are inconsistent with its interests. The government in power should not matter.

Moreover, there has been a tendency to view the Middle East peace process as an isolated abstraction rather than as part of a larger strategic context. It is important to recall that progress in the peace process has been achieved largely because of some radical changes in the region's strategic situation, namely the end of the Cold War and the containment of Iraq.

The end of the Cold War. The romantic, nostalgic notion that the Cold War provided a more orderly international system is simply untrue. Five Arab-Israeli wars were fought during the Cold War and none since. Leonid Brezhnev did not stop Iraqi president Saddam Husayn from invading Iran, and it is unlikely he would have stopped him from invading Kuwait. The Soviet Union was a troublemaker that consistently thwarted attempts at peacemaking. Its demise was a tremendous gain for the cause of Middle East peace. Although the USSR will not be back any time soon, there are worrying signs that Russia and China could still play roles as troublemakers.

The containment of Iraq. Had President George Bush not intervened after Saddam invaded Kuwait, there is a very real possibility that there would have been within a few years a nuclear war between Iraq and Israel. Moreover, Yasir Arafat was forced to make peace once radical alternatives like Iraq had disappeared. These facts suggest that Bush did more for Israel's security than any other president since Harry S. Truman. Currently, however, the containment of Iraq is failing. The United States needs to accelerate Saddam's demise if it truly wants to help the peace process.

Iran could soon take on the mischievous role in the Middle East once played by the Soviet Union. It is on the path to acquiring long-range missiles with chemical, biological, and possibly nuclear weapons. In response, the United States has to give priority to missile defense, adopting a crash course based on speed rather than efficiency -- the type of priority given to the Manhattan project or the Polaris project. If the United States does not take this sort of action, the larger Middle East strategic situation will deteriorate, making progress on the peace process much more difficult.

Thomas Donilon: After a long pause in activity, the U.S. Middle East "peace team" will begin to re-engage in the peace process. The United States will tell the parties that they need to negotiate amongst themselves, and that the United States will be available to help in any way desired. Despite having only eighteen more months in office, President Bill Clinton will directly involve himself in the process if he sees a real chance for a breakthrough. Regardless of the potential political pitfalls, Clinton sees the peace process as a significant U.S. interest. He has also invested himself in it deeply, and he undoubtedly would like to see that investment pay off before leaving the White House.

While the core relationship between Israel and the United States is unshakable, the relationship did deteriorate during the period after 1996. In the period between 1993 and 1996, the United States and Israel saw eye-to-eye on the relationship between peace and security, especially in light of the long term threat of Iran and Iraq. Hopefully, Ehud Barak's government will return to this credo.

With all the focus on Barak, it is important to look at the Arab partners to see if they are really ready to take the next step toward peace. Is Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad ready to make peace? He certainly does not move at "internet speed." It is even unclear whether he understands the concept of "windows of opportunity." Is Egypt ready to move beyond a cold peace? Is Arafat more interested in the peace process than in peace?

Impressions of Barak

Paul Wolfowitz: It is quite extraordinary to find someone with Barak's high intelligence who is also the most decorated soldier in Israeli history. He has a hard-headed approach to peace, but he also realizes that there is no absolute security in the world and that sometimes risks in the peace process are far less risky than continued confrontation. Barak has the experience and intellectual capacity to make those judgments extraordinarily well.

Thomas Donilon: Barak already has good relationships with many U.S. officials from his service as chief of staff and later as foreign minister. He thinks a lot about fulfilling the legacy of former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. The campaign he just ran in Israel for the prime ministership demonstrates that he is extraordinarily disciplined and that he has a very precise mind. He made campaign promises, notably to pull Israeli troops out of Lebanon within one year, that are likely to demand his total effort and attention.

Re-engaging Syria

Thomas Donilon: Engaging Syria is both the key to the Lebanon problem and the key to a comprehensive regional peace. Engaging Syria is definitely the right policy, but it will be difficult. The two sides are still very far apart both on security issues and on territorial issues. Moreover, it is not clear that Asad is even ready to make peace. Asad is not comfortable with fast, radical changes, and it is unclear whether he understands the concept of "windows of opportunity."

Two lessons can be gleaned from the 1993-1996 negotiations between Israel and Syria: First, do not let negotiations linger, and second, direct negotiations between the parties is an essential ingredient of success. If negotiations are to work there cannot be two weeks between each move, and the parties have to engage each other directly rather than through intermediaries.

Paul Wolfowitz: The United States should take the offer to place U.S. troops on the Golan off the negotiating table. A U.S. troop presence on the Golan is neither in the U.S. interest nor in Israel's interest. The U.S. military is overstretched and, too often, when U.S. troops are placed on the ground as guarantors of agreements, the United States ends up defending the violators. If the United States wants to guarantee agreements between Israel and Syria, it can do so in other ways, such as through monitors and satellites.

Israel can deal with threats of terrorism and conventional warfare. The real threat is ballistic missiles. In this sense, a potential deal with Syria is even more important for Israel's security than a deal with the Palestinians.

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