Israel's Election:

The Countdown to May 17 Begins

by Robert Satloff **(/experts/robert-satloff)**

Apr 26, 1999

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Brief Analysis

Finally, after four months of pre-campaign maneuvering, the fireworks of Israel's 51st Independence Day last week marked the welcome opening of the real campaign for this country's May 17 elections. Until now, Israelis have witnessed a surreal campaign, dominated by polls for an electoral contest that will never happen (that is, a second round contest between Binyamin Netanyahu and Central Party leader Yitzhak Mordechai) and the wooing of Russian immigrant votes by courting a country (Russia) that denounces Israel's strategic ally and arms Israel's foes. Unless Labor's Ehud Barak can convince both Mordechai and Arab candidate Azmi Bishara to quit the race before May 17, the campaign will last until June 1 when Netanyahu and Barak, likely to be the top two prime ministerial finalists, meet in a run-off. Often overlooked, however, is the impact that May 17's parliamentary ballot will have on any subsequent vote and the make-up of the subsequent government coalition.

Where Have All the Issues Gone? For a country consumed with politics and facing major national questions, this campaign has been about personalities, with little time devoted to strategic issues or the peace process. Netanyahu has tried to inject a note of alarm into the election -- first by accenting German ambassador Theodor Wallau's statement that the European Union sees Jerusalem as a corpus separatum, and more recently by issuing closure orders for offices in Jerusalem's Orient House -- but so far the issue has not caught the public's imagination. To a certain extent, this reflects an underlying national consensus on key questions. Analytically, a broad spectrum of Israelis accepts the inevitability of a limited Palestinian quasi-state in most of the West Bank and Gaza, with differences among the major Israeli parties only in terms of kilometers, not principles; a broad spectrum accepts that peace with Syria is likely to require withdrawal to the international border, but it does not have to decide if that price is too steep because Hafiz al-Asad evinces no sign of wanting to engage in serious negotiations; and a broad spectrum understands that withdrawal of Israeli troops from southern Lebanon depends largely on what happens in Damascus and Tehran and is therefore willing to let both Barak and Netanyahu make campaign-type promises to "bring our boys home" within a year of the election, knowing these commitments cannot be fulfilled without Syrian (and perhaps even Iranian) assent.

Interestingly, the parties ideologically opposed to further concession on the West Bank and the Golan are not faring well. Ex-Likud minister and Oslo opponent Ze'ev "Benny" Begin hovers at less than 5 percent in the prime minister's

race, and the Third Way, a party that won a surprising four seats in 1996 on a platform of defending the Golan, is unlikely to win any seats this time. Similarly, the National Religious Party, which has become the principal mouthpiece of the ideological settlement movement in recent years, took a half-step to the left, as its most outspoken hawk, Hanan Porat, was thrashed in internal party primaries. Overall, on national security issues, the impact of five years of the Oslo process -- including three years of Likud's administration of Oslo -- has made the electorate less ideological and more pragmatic. The result is that the prospect of a broad national consensus on these issues may be greater today than at any time in recent memory. Indeed, the prospect of some form of national unity government -- possible, though not yet likely -- emerging from these elections may itself be one reason why the level of political debate may be so low.

The problem, however, is that Israeli politics itself is more divided today -- on religious and ethnic grounds -- than at any time in recent memory. More than any other issue, the question of religion and state dominates this campaign. The current cause celebre is the case of Aryeh Deri, former interior minister and current leader of the Sephardi- and Orthodox-based Shas party, who -- after an eight-year legal marathon -- was convicted of bribery and sentenced to four years in prison. In several respects, Shas, the largest of Israel's ultra-Orthodox parties, broke the mold of Israeli politics: It supports territorial compromise with the Palestinians and withdrawal from the Golan and retains its followers by an appeal to ethnic pride, traditional religious values, and a reputation for providing social services (such as schools, clinics, and youth groups) that the cash-strapped government cannot match. (Even a prominent Druze leader volunteered he may work on behalf of Shas because Shas "delivers.") Ironically, Shas can provide those services only by tapping government coffers, which means that being part of a governing coalition -- no matter whom the prime minister may be -- is its top priority; conversely, because of Shas's flexibility on regional issues, having Shas in the coalition is an equally high priority for any prime minister. The rub is that Shas is also a lightning rod for criticism by the most important electoral bloc in the election, Israel's new Russian voters. This overwhelmingly secular aliyah chafes at Shas's monopoly on the Interior Ministry and its halachic religious interpretation on issues of personal status -- an interpretation that has ostracized thousands of the new immigrants whose Jewishness is, technically, in question. The last two weeks have witnessed the spectacle of politicians of all stripes trying to distance themselves gingerly from Deri but not Shas, all the while courting the Russians -- thus symbolizing the difficulty that the two major parties now face, having implemented a political system that permits small parties to hold governments hostage to parochial demands.

Polling, Everything and Nothing: As is routinely noted by the media, this campaign is Israel's first poll-driven vote. While this is true of Labor and Likud, this is especially the case for the Center Party, an amalgam of former Likudniks (such as former Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai, former Finance Minister Dan Meridor, and former Tel Aviv mayor Roni Milo), a few Laborites (like Oslo negotiator Uri Savir) and other notable figures (including former Israel Defense Forces chief of staff Amnon Lipkin-Shahak and the late Yitzhak Rabin's daughter Dalia Pelossof) who collectively share little in common politically other than an abiding antipathy to Netanyahu. Polls determined who would lead the party -- Mordechai -- and polls showing that Mordechai would trounce Netanyahu in a head-to-head contest by a far larger margin than would Labor's Barak are the rationale for the party's election slogan, "Only Mordechai can win big!" The only problem is that Mordechai barely breaks 10 percent in the polls and stands virtually zero chance of ever meeting Netanyahu in a head-to-head contest. Mordechai, therefore, is running for an election that will never occur.

According to press reports, Barak is privately wooing the Center Party with "good cop" promises of the defense ministry for Mordechai and other portfolios for Meridor, Shahak, and Milo. At the same time, Barak is applying his own "bad cop" pressure on Mordechai by publicly threatening to keep the defense portfolio for himself. If Mordechai and Bishara -- who has proven the legitimacy of an Arab candidacy -- do step down before May 17, that would clear the field for Barak to capture all the "anti-Bibi" vote. This scenario gives Barak his best chance of winning, as more

Arabs are likely to vote in round one than would vote in a run-off, when Arab parties are not also competing for Knesset seats. (Of course, this could prompt Begin to step aside and urge his settler supporters to swallow their distaste for Netanayhu and vote for him in the first round, but Israel's right-wing is intensely ideological, evidenced by its strategic blunder in bringing down Netanyahu in the first place.) On national television, Mordechai did promise to remain in the race, no matter what, and his presence on the ballot is important to maximize the Knesset votes for his party, which could range anywhere from five to twelve, depending on Mordechai's decision. Yet, a profound electoral embarrassment for Mordechai -- garnering just about 10 percent of the vote -- might be worse for him than if he were to cut a deal before May 17. A further complication is that Mordechai's recommendation may not be enough to convince his supporters to vote for Barak. Originally from Iraqi Kurdish stock, Mordechai's base of support is among precisely those Sephardi Israelis who would shudder at the idea of voting for Labor, and many would gravitate back to their historic home in the Likud if Mordechai dropped out early.

Parties, Nothing and Everything: If polls are driving this election, parties are invisible and seem almost meaningless. It is virtually impossible to find an election poster with the words "Labor" or "Likud" on it. So as not to irritate Sephardim, Russians, religious voters, or any other ethnic or religious grouping repulsed by a party with a reputation for secular, socialist, or Ashkenazi elitism, Labor has submerged itself into the "One Israel" coalition with David Levy's Gesher and the moderate Orthodox party Meimad. Within the Likud, the disparagement of the party is even starker. Its standard-bearer's main slogan -- "Only Netanyahu" -- is meant to convey the idea that only the incumbent premier has the spine to deal with the many challenges facing Israel; it could be read as a double-entendre, in the sense that without Meridor, Begin, Levy, and other historic Likud stalwarts, the party today is indeed "only Netanyahu." (Even Jerusalem mayor Ehud Olmert covered his electoral bets by welcoming Labor's Barak to Jerusalem's City Hall and declaring that he, Olmert, would not countenance a Likud strategy of claiming that Barak would divide Jerusalem, a motif that worked well against Shimon Peres in 1996.)

Ironically, if the prime ministerial vote goes to a June run-off, how the parties fare in May is likely to be the decisive factor. By the run-off, the complexion of the next Knesset will be clear and potential coalition alignments will become obvious. Yet, the implications will be far from obvious. For example, the Center Left/Left is likely to do well in the Knesset vote, but this could cut both ways when it comes to the run-off. If the Center Party, Meretz, and the Russian immigrant parties do so well in round one that religious parties fear they might be shut out of a Barak-led coalition, this could frighten ultra-Orthodox voters into turning out for Netanyahu in the second round in higher proportions than originally expected. Conversely, if Barak is able to present an impressive shadow coalition to the voters before the run-off, highlighting centrists like Mordechai and Meridor, he might win the "wavering undecideds" who dislike Netanyahu but fear the Peace Now instincts of many Laborites. After May 17, perhaps the most important man in Israel will be Russian immigrant leader (and, less important for these purposes, Trade and Industry Minister) Natan Sharansky. Although part of the current ruling coalition, Sharansky is also open to a coalition under Barak, especially as Netanyahu is actively supporting a rival Russian immigrant party led by his scandal-plagued former chef de cabinet, Avigdor Lieberman. If Sharansky's Yisrael B'Aliyah party emerges from May 17 with its standing relatively intact, his endorsement of a candidate in the run-off could provide the extra fillip to push that candidate -- whether Netanyahu or Barak -- over the top. For now, the only important point is that any polling about the second round without knowing the results of the first round is irrelevant. Too much about June 1 will be determined by the outcome of May 17 for those polls to matter.

Conclusion: On the surface, Barak looks the stronger candidate. With the country plastered with his James Carville-conceived "Israel wants a change!" posters and volunteers flocking to assure a successful get-out-the-vote drive, his machine looks better oiled than Netanyahu's. Whereas Likud was hungry for victory in 1996, today the enthusiasm belongs to Labor. Barak's major weakness, however, is among the critical Russian vote, which Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon is seeking to exploit through his Moscow gambit; through his frequent visits to Moscow and interviews on

Russian state TV, Sharon is able to attract more television viewership among Russian-speaking Israelis than he would by appearing on any local television talk show. More generally, despite all the tribulations of the last three years, Netanyahu has remarkable staying-power in the polls, buoyed by the addition of more than a half-million new voters -- mostly "Russians" and youth, especially ultra-Orthodox -- who are predominantly Likud supporters.

In the end, this election will be won and lost on the margin: Will Labor cajole a high enough Arab turn-out for Barak to compensate for the new Likud voters? Will Netanyahu win back 90-plus percent of Benny Begin's supporters in round two or just a disappointing three-quarters? Will Sharon's flirtation with Moscow succeed in getting Netanyahu the extra 5 percent of the Russian vote he claims will assure reelection? Will Mordechai's endorsement of Barak really matter? Given the state of the 1999 electoral campaign, these nuts-and-bolts political issues are preoccupying politicians even more than wild cards like a sudden outbreak of terrorism, a Palestinian declaration of independence, or an election-eve withdrawal from Lebanon.

Robert Satloff, executive director of The Washington Institute, is on research sabbatical in Israel.

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