

Israeli Elections Result: Implications for Middle East Peacemaking

[David Makovsky](#) and [Michael Oren](#)

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On February 11, 2008, Michael Oren and David Makovsky addressed a special Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Dr. Oren, a renowned scholar of Middle Eastern military and diplomatic history, is a visiting professor at Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service and a senior fellow at the Shalem Center in Jerusalem. Mr. Makovsky is a senior fellow and director of the Institute's Project on the Middle East Peace Process. Dr. Oren and Mr. Makovsky spoke about the recent parliamentary elections in Israel and the likely policies of the new Israeli government. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

David Makovsky

Israel is entering uncharted waters. For the first time in Israeli history, the next prime minister may not be the leader of the party that won the most Knesset seats. Although the centrist Kadima Party, led by Tzipi Livni, won the most seats, she is unlikely to cobble together the necessary sixty-one seats to form a center-left coalition. If Binyamin Netanyahu -- leader of the Likud Party, which garnered the second most seats in the elections -- can show President Shimon Peres that he can form a coalition and Livni cannot, then Netanyahu may become prime minister. Netanyahu's prospects appear better because right-leaning parties have a ten-seat advantage over the left-leaning bloc. Other configurations, however, cannot be ruled out, such as a rotation agreement between Kadima and Likud for the premiership, as was the case with Labor and Likud between 1984 and 1988.

Young voters and women flocked to the polls in response to Livni's dual message of hope and toughness. She siphoned off voters from parties to her left by convincing them that a vote for her was a vote against Netanyahu. In doing so, she brought traditional Labor Party strongholds over to Kadima. If one looks at the election results by municipality, Kadima won in cities that usually vote for Labor and even tied in the kibbutzim, which are historically and ideologically attached to Labor. Ehud Barak's election tactics of trying to undercut Livni, rather than running on Labor's traditional core issues such as the peace process and social issues, further weakened Labor's position vis-a-vis Kadima. Although Barak has been a popular defense minister, support for him during this election did not materialize.

Hamas and the 2006 war in Lebanon have caused the Israeli electorate's shift to the right. As seen by Israelis, unilateral withdrawals from southern Lebanon and the Gaza Strip have brought vulnerability rather than peace. If one looks at the election results in Ashkelon, Beersheva, and Sderot, which have borne the brunt of the rocket attacks from Gaza, over 70 percent of their residents voted for right-leaning parties. Avigdor Lieberman has been able to exploit images of Israeli Arabs waving Hamas flags to garner support for his Yisrael Beiteinu Party and its message of "No loyalty, no citizenship." Lieberman will likely be the kingmaker in this election, and although he has said he would prefer a right-leaning government, he is keeping his options open. Had Labor done better, Netanyahu would have reached out to Barak to keep Kadima out of the coalition in the hope that Livni's party would disintegrate. But since Netanyahu will probably want to avoid a narrow right-leaning government, he is far more likely to reach out to Livni instead.

There is speculation that a Netanyahu premiership would move forward on talks with Syria rather than with the Palestinians, because the Syrian track would not face as much resistance. He realizes, however, that the Palestinian issue cannot be ignored and has put forward the idea of an "economic peace" with the Palestinians. His aides state privately that he sees eye to eye with Quartet envoy Tony Blair about how to develop Palestinian institutions. Technological solutions that improve Palestinian life without sacrificing Israeli security exist, including use of biometrics at crossing points and tamper-proof containers for moving goods in and out of the Palestinian territories. This approach, however, will require close cooperation between the prime minister and defense minister, who officially controls the West Bank.

Regardless of who becomes prime minister, a grand peace agreement with the Palestinians is unlikely in the next few years. Creating Palestinian institutions will take time, and it may help Palestinians accept the delay if Israeli settlement expansion is curtailed. One idea is for the parties to demarcate the border between Israel and the West Bank, even though the Israel Defense Forces need to remain in the West Bank for now. Even if all the issues relating to the conflict cannot be resolved, a border demarcation would end the ambiguity over the settlements that has existed since 1967 by defining what territory will become part of Israel and what territory will become the future Palestinian state.

Michael Oren

Although people tend to look at Israeli history through a present-day prism and see political instability, this view is distorted. Israel has never had a violent transfer of power. For its first thirty years, it was led by the Labor Party and for the next thirty years, with brief exceptions, it was led by right or center-right coalitions.

Since Ariel Sharon went into a coma in January 2006, Ehud Olmert has led Kadima from disaster to disaster: the 2006 war in Lebanon, various scandals that have forced ministers to resign, and Olmert's own corruption investigation. So how has Kadima survived? One reason is the fear of Netanyahu and the right, but primarily it is the breakdown of the Israeli left.

Leftist parties originally stood for the values of hard work, but their leaders no longer embody those values -- the head of the Labor Party lives in a \$4-million mansion. In addition, the Israeli public has become disenchanted with the peace process, and has come to realize that the conflict is not about 1967 but rather 1948. In other words, the conflict is not about the territory, but about Israel's very existence. The principle of land for peace has been discredited because Israel's disengagement from southern Lebanon and Gaza has produced rocket fire, not peace. Only the small number of Meretz supporters continue to believe that there is a Palestinian partner for peace.

The army did all it could in Gaza, and no one believes Netanyahu's claims that had he been in charge, Operation Cast Lead would have gone on longer. The perception is that very little can be done in Gaza and the West Bank except to occasionally fight Hamas and build institutions along the lines of the Dayton mission (to train and equip Palestinian security forces).

Israel wants to avoid a clash with the United States in order to facilitate cooperation on Iran. The Iranian issue is possibly the greatest source of disagreement on international issues between the United States and Israel in recent history. Obama is inclined toward rapprochement with Iran, but Israel is highly skeptical of this approach. This skepticism is one of the few issues on which all the major players in Israel agree.

Although the left appears to have been defeated in this election, it will bounce back. Israel is a left-of-center country; it is one of the few nations whose industrialists and economic elite are leftists. Similarly, it is too early to eulogize Olmert. Although he is facing many charges, there are no indictments yet. We have not seen the last of him.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Lauren Cohen, a research assistant at The Washington Institute.