

ISRAELIS CHOSE PRAGMATISM, NOT LIEBERMAN

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The close results of the Israeli election were consistent with the polls – there was no clear winner, and no Israeli Obama. Although Foreign Minister Tzippi Livni overtook ex-Prime Minister Netanyahu in the last week, either will need a wide coalition in order to govern. Netanyahu and his center-right Likud party have the advantage in gathering a majority of like-minded parliamentarians from other parties under his wings. But while Netanyahu can technically cobble together a right-leaning government to stand firm in negotiations with Palestinians and Syria, a narrow coalition would lack the depth necessary for stability.

In dividing the vote for the largest parties equally between Livni and Netanyahu, and generally spurning the smaller ideological parties on the Right and Left, the Israeli public showed a clear preference for cautious pragmatism over ideology. Recognizing the artificial sharpening of differences that accompanies all election campaigns, Israeli voters know that there are few significant policy differences between the two large parties. On the core challenges that will determine Israel's future, Netanyahu and Livni have similar pragmatic approaches, and can work together.

For security and diplomacy challenges, a unity government headed by Netanyahu and Livni, joined by Labor party leader Ehud Barak, makes sense. Netanyahu would be a logical Finance Minister, Livni would stay on as Foreign Minister (perhaps rotating with Netanyahu as Prime Minister after two years,) while Barak remains Defense Minister.

The three are rationalists with a great deal of experience on issues of war and peace. Netanyahu and Livni were members of Likud for many years, but when Livni joined Ariel Sharon's breakaway Kadima party in 2005 during the fight over the unilateral withdrawal from Gaza, Netanyahu stayed to take over Likud. With the failure of the Gaza pullout, particularly after the Hamas takeover and rocket attacks that led to the recent Israeli military operation, the substantive differences became moot.

In a pragmatic centrist-based government, Avigdor Lieberman and his party would have limited influence. His support taps into raw security and identify fears, reflecting Israeli anger at the Arab representatives in the Knesset who defend Hamas and Hizbollah, and participate in propaganda campaigns labeling Zionism and Jewish self-determination as "apartheid" and "racism". These activities during the Gaza war increased support for Lieberman, and the confrontation is likely to grow, but as a side issue outside the coalition.

The new government's agenda will be dominated by the question of how to confront the radical Islamic regime in Iran, which is seeking nuclear weapons, declares its genocidal aim of "wiping Israel off the map", and arms the Hamas and Hizbollah terror organizations. Unless the Obama Administration's dialogue convinces Iran to stop the nuclear program, Israel will have a year to consider whether to launch a preventive attack. The triumvirate of Netanyahu, who has served as Prime Minister, Livni, the current Foreign Minister, and Barak, a former IDF Chief of Staff and current Defense Minister, provides the foundation for careful consideration of this complex issue.

This team is also well suited for confronting the impact of the global economic collapse. Netanyahu, who was Finance Minister under Sharon and revived a dismal economy, is widely viewed as the Israeli politician with the greatest knowledge of and experience in this realm. In a unity government, it would make sense for him take responsibility for this portfolio, including employment, budget decisions, and inflation, and the broad coalition would allow him to reject sectoral demands.

One of the first issues the new leadership will likely face will focus on relations with the Obama administration, and the efforts of Special Envoy Mitchell to restart peace negotiations with the Palestinian Authority. Mitchell and Obama are expected to press Israel to remove unauthorized outposts in the West Bank as a gesture towards the Palestinians, and as agreed by both Prime Ministers Sharon and Olmert, but never implemented, due to their weak governments.

Quick action on this issue would be vital in ensuring cooperation with Washington, but to blunt the internal criticism and even violent opposition from the remaining settlement ideologues, a strong coalition is necessary.

And beyond this, a unity government will be able to negotiating with the Americans on requests to remove vital security check points that are the source of bitter Palestinians complaints. A few weeks ago, at one of these crossings, a Palestinian was caught hiding a powerful rifle that security officials believe would have been used to kill Israelis in Beersheva or a neighboring city. On these issues, Livni and Barak – who are not settlement advocates -- can take the lead.

The bottom line is that after an intense campaign, Israelis overwhelming chose pragmatism in slightly different forms. In practice, this means a cautious but open approach to peace overtures, cooperative relations with the United States, and a firm line on security threats, particularly from Iran and its allies.