

NETANYAHU OR LIVNI? ISRAELIS WEIGH ELECTION OPTIONS

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As Israelis prepare to elect a new government on February 10, the polls show a very close race, with little enthusiasm for any of the main parties and leaders. Among some voters, the defensive war in Gaza to end years of Hamas terror attacks, and the flood of unfair and biased condemnations around the world, have created a sense of frustration. In response, polls show increased support for leaders that promise a strong response to these threats and will resist pressure to take security risks, while maintaining American support as Israel's only dependable ally. Although there are other issues on the agenda -- including the impact of the global economic meltdown, a long leadership crisis, political corruption, and internal issues -- security remains at the top of the list.

If the Likud Party receives the most votes, Benjamin Netanyahu will become Prime Minister for the second time after a ten year hiatus. Likud occupies a center-right position on the Israeli political spectrum, and its supporters are generally skeptical regarding the prospects for quick and lasting peace agreements in region dominated by Islamists and Jihadists. Netanyahu resigned from the Cabinet in 2005, in protest to then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's Gaza withdrawal. When Hamas took control of Gaza, killing Palestinian opponents and using humanitarian aid to produce weapons, Netanyahu regained support.

But Likud has faltered in the last week, and the centrist Kadima party, which leads the outgoing government, may come out on top, giving Foreign Minister Tzippi Livni an opportunity to become Prime Minister. Kadima was formed three years ago by Ariel Sharon shortly before he became ill, and it lacks strong foundations. It has also been weakened by association with corruption cases that forced current Prime Minister Olmert to resign, and led to the elections.

As a relatively fresh face untainted by corruption, Livni began with strong support, but her lack of military experience is a drawback, particularly as threats to Israel increase. Her record as Foreign Minister during the 2006 Lebanon war and the recent fighting in Gaza is criticized for relying on United Nations and European security promises that have not been implemented. These factors have reduced Kadima's chances, but there is still a possibility of a surprise victory.

Likud or Kadima on their own will get no more than half of the 61 seats in the Knesset -- Israel's parliament -- necessary to form a government. If Netanyahu wins, he has shown a preference for reappointing the current Defense Minister Ehud Barak, who heads the once powerful Labor Party. Barak's strong military record and his

success in preparing the IDF for the Gaza operation, improved his and Labor's reputation. But the center-Left party is divided, lacks focus, and will not bring enough seats to complete the coalition.

This situation might lead the three centrist parties to form a broad emergency government that many Israelis believe is necessary to deal effectively with the threats and the potential need to use force to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Together, they would form a majority, and could add smaller sectoral parties to provide greater stability.

Alternatively, Netanyahu may opt for a narrower government, based on parties favor strong military action against Iran and its allies. A few years ago, Avigdor Lieberman broke away from Likud and formed a more hawkish party – Israel Beitenu – which has shown the largest jump in support after the recent Gaza war, and may surpass Labor. They can be expected to oppose pressure for Israel to relinquish more territory, arguing that the proposed Palestinian state will be a terrorist haven. But Lieberman's party is unlikely to get more than fifteen percent of the total vote, reflecting the limits of this ideological sector.

Finally, any coalition is likely to include some or all of the parties representing the religious Jewish groups that are an important part of Israeli society. Israel is not a theocracy, in contrast to Iran and other self-proclaimed Islamic states, but the Jewish tradition, culture and educational values are important, and the parties that emphasize these aspects of Israel generally receive about fifteen percent of the vote and seats in the Knesset. Their leaders oppose proposals that they fear will again block access to the Jewish holy sites in the ancient walled city founded by King David three thousand years ago. But their main concerns are social and economic, seeking government support for large families, and this will pose difficult issues in the current economic environment.

In the opposition, the main parties on the Left are likely to suffer further losses, reflecting their association with the failed peace efforts which resulted in mass terror attacks. The parties based in the Arab minority (which constitutes about twenty percent of the population) have alienated Jewish voters by calling for the abolition of Israeli as a Jewish state, and contributing to demonization. As a result, these blocs are expected to get less than one-third of the total vote in the 2009 elections, and have correspondingly little impact on the policies of the government.

Beyond the specific outcome, most Israelis hope that the results will produce a stable government that will survive for at least four years. Israel is a robust democracy, with all sectors and views represented, but after six campaigns in twelve years, everyone is exhausted. Domestic political stability will also allow Israel's leaders to focus on the major problems and threats that the country faces – from Hamas on the southern border in Gaza, to Hezbollah on the northern border in Lebanon, to Syria and Iran, and elsewhere. These are very dangerous times for Israel, and require a leadership that is up to the tasks at hand.