

AN OVERVIEW OF THE ISRAELI ELECTIONS: WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR THE PEACE PROCESS?

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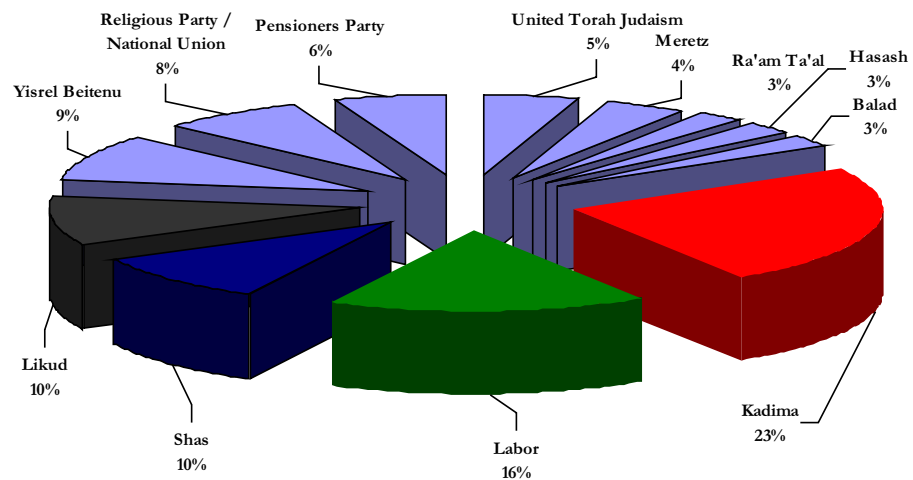
With elections recently being held first in Palestine and then in Israel, the peace-process also seems to be at a new crossroads. The electoral victory of Hamas that is still considered to be a radical organization by many countries around the world put the hopes of finding a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian problem on hold, at least for the near future. However, the Israeli elections and the electoral victory of Kadima Party that advocates for a unilateral withdrawal from the West Bank re-brought the prospects for reaching a solution into consideration. Now the main issue at hand is to what extent the new Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert will be successful in implementing the important steps initiated by Ariel Sharon last summer.

March 2006 Parliamentary Elections:

One day after the new Palestinian Prime Minister, Ismail Haniyeh, and his cabinet were sworn in, a process that formally puts the Islamic movement of Hamas in charge of the Palestinian Authority, the Israelis had their elections for the 17th Knesset on March 28, 2006.

According to the election results, Kadima, the centrist party headed by Ehud Olmert got 29 seats out of 120, whereas Amir Peretz's Labor Party got 20, ultra-orthodox Shas 12, Likud 12, Yisrael Beitenu 11, National Religious Party/National Union 9 and the Pensioners' Party 7 out of a total of 120, making for a fragmented legislature, even by Israeli standards.

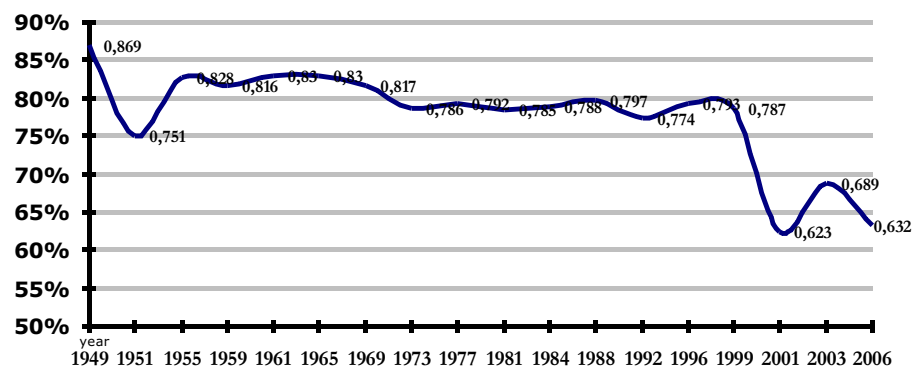
Israeli Election Results



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Last three Israeli elections witnessed very low voter turnouts and this one was also among the lowest in the nation's history with a percentage of 63.2. In the last elections of 2003, turnout was 69% and earlier in 2001, it was 62%. There might be a couple of reasons for these low figures:

Israeli Election Results



First of all, some analysts argue that the low voter turnout shows that the Israelis have a somewhat resigned view of the disengagement policy on which Olmert based his election campaign. They say the Israelis are resigned especially after the Palestinian elections, since now the Palestinian territory on the other side is controlled by Hamas. However, it is also possible to make the opposite argument. Since the Israelis are disillusioned with Hamas's rise to power and since they do not accept them as a partner, they do not want to wait for them forever and instead chose to support Olmert's plan for unilateral withdrawal.

More important reason for the low voter turnout might be related to the fact that the Israeli electorate did not know very much about the leaders of the main parties. For example, most sections of the Israeli population outside of Jerusalem did not know Olmert well. He was the mayor of Jerusalem for many years and his performance did not garner much attention. During his term, more people were leaving the city than arriving mostly because of the poor public services and in part because of the increasingly religious character of the city.

Even the fact that Ehud Olmert does not have a nickname says a lot about him. Public figures in Israel acquire nicknames, such as Ariel "Arik" Sharon and Benjamin "Bibi" Netanyahu, but Ehud Olmert is simply known as Ehud Olmert pointing out that he wasn't embraced enough by the Israeli electorate. During the election, people seemed to vote on the legacy of Sharon. On the other hand, however, many believed that Kadima would be a one man party and that its lifespan would not exceed that of its founder, Ariel Sharon. In spite of all of these developments, Olmert managed to gain 29 seats for this very newly-founded party and this can be considered as an important success, mainly of Olmert's.

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Since the Israelis did not know very much about Olmert, they would at least chose him according to his potential political partners but it appears the electorate also did not know much about the leader of the Labor Party, Amiram Peretz. Peretz's Moroccan ethnic origins initially helped him during the election campaign; however, he was mostly projecting an image of a politician who was not ready for prime time and for handling the issues of security and defense. Since he did not have any public experience, most people did not believe he was fit for the job.

Even though the voter turnout in the last elections were low in relation to all of these reasons, after all, the Israeli electorate made it clear that they support Olmert's unilateral withdrawal plan, on which the bulk of Kadima campaign was based on. This election has almost become a referendum to accept the Olmert Plan or not. Now, let's see in detail what the majority of the Israeli population has voted for.

The Issue at the Heart of the Election Campaign: The Olmert Plan:

There are more than 240,000 settlers in the West Bank and 170,000 Israelis in the areas of East Jerusalem. In relation to his Plan, Olmert wants to complete the barrier between Israel and the West Bank to include several settlement blocks on the Israeli side. Ariel, Gush Etzion and the West Bank area east of Jerusalem would all be inside the barrier. More than 15 small settlements outside of the barrier would be evacuated. The present barrier cuts into the West Bank to the east of the 1949-1967 "green line" between Israel and the Palestinian territories, leaving former Palestinian agricultural land as well as the biggest settlement blocks on the Israeli side of the barrier. In the following two to three years, Israel would build alternative communities for the settlers, either in the large West Bank settlement blocks that Israel intends to retain between the pre-1967 border (the Green Line) and the 450-mile separation barrier, or outside the Green Line. Olmert calls this process "consolidation" of Israeli borders and plans to evacuate any of the smaller Jewish settlements in the West Bank and annex the largest settlements to form Israeli borders with or without Palestinian agreement by 2010.

Olmert's unilateral withdrawal is similar to last summer's Gaza disengagement only on a much larger scale. The Israeli army then evacuated 7000 Jewish settlers from all of Gaza and another thousand from the northern parts of the West Bank. If the Olmert plan goes ahead, the Israeli army and the police will be evacuating 10 times that number up to 70,000 Jewish settlers many of them by force. Just like the Gaza withdrawal, the Olmert Plan would be unilateral since Israel refuses to negotiate with Hamas but unlike the Gaza Disengagement, the Israeli armed forces would remain inside and they would remain in control.

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The Israeli electorate voted for this plan by supporting the Kadima but a party with big plans got an unexpectedly modest mandate and whether Olmert will be able to implement this plan or not will heavily depend on its coalition partners.

What will the new government be like?

Ehud Olmert made it clear from the very beginning that anyone who joins a Kadima-led coalition must accept the Plan for unilateral withdrawal from the West Bank. For this reason, he will likely try to put together a coalition that is supportive of his disengagement policy by choosing his partners from leftist parties.

Kadima's most probable biggest coalition partner is the Labor Party. During these elections, Labor did not focus very much on the security issue or the relationship with the Palestinians, but instead preferred to campaign on economic issues. Peretz promised to restore pensions and to raise the minimum monthly wage to 1000 dollars. His high votes are related to his success in mounting an assault on Netanyahu's social policies. He was against Netanyahu's neo-Thacherite welfare-cutting policies. The Labor Party would make a powerful natural coalition partner of Kadima mainly related to its policy on the Olmert Plan. Labor had indicated that it does want territorial compromise and it is willing to support some unilateral moves along the West Bank.

The Ultra-Orthodox Shas Party finished the election race in third place by getting 12 seats out of 120. Shas did especially well with impoverished orthodox Jews (religious right, economic left). There is a good chance that Shas might be included in the coalition since it is flexible on the question of territories. In case that Shas is included in the coalition, it is estimated that they would demand the communications and housing portfolios.

A third probable coalition partner for Kadima is the surprise success of the last elections: Yisrael Beitenu. This is originally a party for post-Soviet immigrants. Another important electoral base of the party is the non-immigrants who like its stance (political right, economic left) and has a distrust of the influential religious establishment. Even though it is considered a racist party in its plans for the Arab citizens of Israel the party proposes to transfer the Arab population of Israel to the Palestinian territories and bringing the settlers back--still, bringing this party into the coalition is feasible. The Party leader Liberman had indicated on various occasions that he wasn't ruling out the possibility of backing a unilateral withdrawal from the West Bank, provided the plan met Israel's security needs. There were also some noises within Kadima circles that Yisrael Beitenu might be a better coalition partner than the Shas since it is less demanding in terms of portfolios. As a result, even though not the first option, Yisrael Beitenu is still a good candidate to be a partner in the Kadima-led coalition.

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Since the pro-settlement, anti-Olmert Plan Likud Party can not be a partner of Kadima in a coalition; the next option is the Pensioners' Party that is devoted to better rights for the elderly. Kadima officials had said in various occasions that this party is a natural coalition partner for their party. The Pensioners seem likely to support Mr. Olmert's withdrawal plan. The success of the Pensioners' Party, led by the former Mossad spymaster Rafi Eitan which in its first entry into the Israeli parliament secured seven seats for its single-issue program, was the biggest surprise of the election. If they are included in the coalition, they could even end up with 1-2 ministries, but probably not top posts such as Labor or Social Affairs.

In line with all of these developments, Olmert's Kadima Party (29 seats) would probably prefer to form a coalition with the Labor Party (20), one/or both of the ultra-Orthodox parties (12 from Shas and 6 from United Torah Judaism) and the Pensioners' Party (7) in order to form a compact but stable government consisting of a minimum 61 seats. If Shas quits on the eve of the implementation of the convergence plan, then either Yisrael Beiteinu or Meretz of Yossi Beilin might be brought into the coalition. Coalition talks are expected to be completed after the Passover holiday in mid-April.

As seen from the Knesset statistics, it seems as if the Olmert Plan will go through. Olmert is not nearly as strong as he could be but the new Parliament is diffuse and the right wing opposed to withdrawal does not have enough votes to block it.

Unilateral Withdrawal: Is it a good Idea?

Since now it is clear that the implementation of the Olmert Plan is very likely based on the arithmetic of the last Israeli elections, it now becomes important to question if this plan is good for the peace process.

First of all, it is important to note that this plan has encountered suspicion due to its unilateral nature, particularly in the Arab world. Many Palestinians had declared their objection to the plan at several occasions. At the end of a two-day Arab League summit meeting in Khartoum at the beginning of April, the leaders condemned Olmert for his threat to draw up Israel's borders unilaterally by 2010. Even the United States had hesitated to comment on Olmert's proposal for unilateral withdrawal due to not knowing the details related to it.

Whatever borders Israel fixes are not likely to get international recognition, particularly if those borders leave Palestinians cut in half- in the West Bank and Gaza- and unable to get from one part of their country to another without going through Israel. But after years of peace talks and road maps, the general border lines are pretty clear, and they definitely require a West Bank withdrawal.

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While the ultimate solution to the conflict can only be a negotiated one, as opposed to a unilateral drawing of final borders by Israel, a negotiated deal is not going to happen until Hamas repudiates terrorism and recognizes Israel's right to exist. Considering that it is often difficult to reach first best solutions in these territories, it sometimes becomes necessary to work with more practical second best solutions. In spite of all of its deficiencies related to its unilateral nature, Olmert plan still can be considered as a step in the right direction since it is a movement away from Old Likud policies of pro-settlement and non-recognition of Palestinian right to sovereignty.

Conclusion:

In the recent Israeli elections for the 17th Knesset, more than the economy, more than the social program, the issue of security tended to be the defining factor in how the Israelis voted. Underlying each choice was the question of Israeli withdrawal from the Palestinian territories. The elections had turned into a referendum on the Olmert Plan and the Israeli electorate had voted for the Plan and for the unilateral withdrawal.

Most Israelis expected Sharon to go forward with disengagement from the West Bank but now with a twist of fate, it is Olmert's job. The idea that peace is often realized under the leadership of extreme figures had been supported by Menachem Begin who signed the peace treaty with Egypt in 1979 but this thesis was also proved by Ariel Sharon last summer. When Sharon demolished Israel's settlements in Gaza last summer, he broke the taboo on giving up occupied land without a peace deal in return. What has happened over the past few years, under Sharon, is that Sharon has prepared the Israelis for important steps. As proven by the results of the last Israeli elections of March 28, steps taken by Sharon will continue under the leadership of Olmert. Even though not a perfect plan per se, the Olmert Plan will contribute to the necessary conditions to create peace in the region through legitimizing the necessity for Israel to withdraw from the land that the Palestinians must control. At a time when everyone is focusing so heavily on Hamas recognizing Israel, Kadima's electoral success demonstrates the much less talked about shift in Israeli opinion toward recognizing Palestinian right to sovereignty.