

Israelis, in Crisis, Vote for a Government of War

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Dust of Tuesday's voting battle settled down and the battle of forming the next Israeli government has just begun. With Benjamin Netanyahu poised for premiership and Avigdor Lieberman, leader of a "racist and fascist" party (as condemned by Talia Sasson of the Merez party) very well positioned to be the king or queen maker of the next ruling coalition, the Palestinian people and the whole region will have to brace as from next March for an Israeli government of war.

First on the agenda of the new government will be the approval of 2.4 billion shekels ordered on Monday by the outgoing Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to re-equip the army after the war on Gaza as well as an extra military funding of one billion shekels.

Ironically the Israelis went to early elections as a way out of a government crisis, but the narrowly – won victory of Kadima and the inconclusive results of Tuesday's elections have put Israel in disarray and plunged it into a political limbo, with both Tzipi Livni of Kadima and Netanyahu of Likud claiming victory while a kingmaker role is awarded to Avigdor Lieberman and his anti-Arab platform. The tie set the stage for weeks of agonizing coalition negotiations. But what is more important, in view of historic experience, is that whenever Israel was in an internal crisis it used to resort to war as a way to unify its ranks, at least for a while. The present crisis is no exception and it doesn't bode well for the Palestinians and the region.

By the Israeli basic law, the president must consult with all the parties as to who they prefer as prime minister, and whoever is recommended by more Knesset members is given the nod. The law however doesn't oblige the president to nominate Kadima only because it was the winner in the polls. It's now up to President Shimon Peres to decide whether Livni or Netanyahu should have the first shot at forming a government.

The number of Knesset seats needed for majority is 61. With ninety – nine percent of the votes counted early Wednesday the Likud – led right –wing and religious parties have more than 63 seats. Kadima – led center and leftist parties together with the Arab parties got less than 58 seats, which makes Kadima's victory more a failure than a success.

Haaretz on February 8 published a “coalition calculator” predicting three coalition scenarios based on “a weighted average of six polls released at the end of the week”: First a “Netanyahu – led Right – Center Coalition” including Likud, Yesrael Betteinu, Labor and National Union + Jewish Home with a total of 66 Knesset seats, or 76 seats if Shas is added. Second a “Netanyahu – led Lieberman – Free Coalition” including Likud, Kadima, Labor with a total of 65 seats, or 75 seats with Shas. The third, described by Haaretz as the “Dark Horse” was a “Livni – led Coalition” [if Kadima edges Likud, which did happen] including Kadima, Yesrael Betteinu, Labor and Shas with a total of 69 seats. However the third possibility was almost ruled out on Tuesday.

Livni said she would not join any government led by Netanyahu. Lieberman was on record Tuesday night that he will recommend Netanyahu to Peres to lead a “right – wing government.” Shas, which came fifth on Tuesday, was the party that brought the Kadima – led government down over its objection to “negotiating” the future of Jerusalem , which in turn led to Tuesday’s early elections and accordingly will not join Kadima in a new coalition. Moreover Mohammad Barakeh of Hadash and Ahmad Tibi of the United Arab List-Ta’al both confirmed that they will not recommend Livni to Peres for premiership, neither they will support any ruling coalition that includes Lieberman and his party, and “we will sit in the opposition,” according to Tibi. Similarly Ehud Barak of Labor is not a taken – for – granted partner to Kadima in view of his statements that his party will not join a new ruling coalition if it did not get twenty seats in the Knesset and it got only thirteen. However Barak’s chances seem better with Likud whose leader Netanyahu publicly denied Lieberman the post of defense minister and praised Barak for his military performance in Operation Cast Lead against Gaza , hinting he could award Barak the post.

War Planned on Two – state Solution

Right and left –wing Israeli rhetoric however could not smokescreen the fact that Israel ’s latest elections, from Palestinian and Arab perspectives, were competed among the right, the center right and the far right, or between the extremists and the ultra-extremists. Kadima was a breakaway from Likud in the first place. Yesrael Betteinu was an offshoot of Likud. Palestinian blood is on the hands of Netanyahu as much as it is on the hands of Livni and Barak. Does it really matter then if they differ on launching an all out war or limited wars on the Palestinian people, or on which is better to finish them once and for all in a military blitz or to exhaust them to elimination by prolonged gradual small wars!

While all the major winners in the Israeli February 10 election are in consensus on the imminent resumption of war on the Palestinian Gaza Strip, Netanyahu’s political platform promises an immediate political and colonial settlement war in the West Bank as well as for a planned attack on Iran that could embroil the whole region in a very much wider conflict, unless the new U.S. administration of Barak Obama decides to avert such a far – reaching threat by making good on its campaign promises for a dialogue with Tehran and exploits what the Iranian Majlis Speaker Ali Larijani described, during the opening session of the

Munich Conference on Security Policy on February 6, as “the golden opportunity” for the normalization of U.S. – Iran relations.

This ominous outcome of Tuesday’s Israeli general elections does not mean of course that the former cabinet of Ehud Olmert was a government of peace, as it was proved otherwise by the two wars it launched in less than 30 months on Lebanon in 2006 and the recent 22-day war on Gaza, let alone carrying on with the war Olmert’s predecessor Ariel Sharon launched on the autonomous Palestinian Authority in the West Bank in 2002.

However while the outcome makes it very clear that resuming the war on Gaza is top on the agenda of the next government, spotlights are focusing away from Netanyahu’s plans for the West Bank, which is tantamount to an all out war on the so – called two – state solution and the so – called “peace process” to make it happen. He rejects the “ Annapolis approach” and advocates instead a protracted “economic peace” approach as a necessary stage for creating conditions for political peace. He rules out negotiations on the final status issues of the refugees, Jerusalem and colonial Jewish settlements as “non – negotiable.” Netanyahu remains opposed to the land-for-peace concept at the heart of the Palestinian – Israeli signed accords within the framework of the Oslo process. During his campaign he warned against giving up any occupied territory to the Palestinians, claiming it would be “grabbed by extremists,” and said he will not be bound by Olmert’s commitments: “I will not keep Olmert’s commitments to withdraw and I won’t evacuate settlements. Those understandings are invalid and unimportant.” In January Netanyahu said there were other “models” for the Palestinians short of complete sovereignty. He will complete the reconstruction of the “separation wall” and maintain Israeli control over most of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, the main settlement blocs, the Jordan Valley – relegating Palestinians to a series of disconnected Bantustans .

A War Referendum

The drift to what Israelis themselves describe as “right – wing” policies as the crystal clear outcome of the general election on February 10 is indication enough that Israel is in a crisis that has been brewing since its unilateral and unconditional withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000, followed by its inconclusive war on that country in 2006 and exacerbated by its unilateral and unconditional withdrawal from the Palestinian Gaza Strip in another inconclusive war this year, all which prove that the erosion of the military “deterrence,” which the Israeli occupying power used to boast of since its creation in 1948 and which started with the Arab – Israeli war in 1973, is an irreversible historical trend that dictates a change of strategic course from seeking peace based on force and the exploits of force to a quest for peace based on justice and international law.

The erosion of the Israeli “deterrence” and the inconclusiveness of its military performance

since 1973 created the ongoing crisis that brought in the Likud to power for the first time in 1977 to end Labor and “left’s” historical monopoly of government and usher in an era where none of the major parties could anymore wield enough popular support to score a “conclusive” electoral victory ever since, and the latest elections proved that this trend is there to stay for a long time to come.

However instead of drifting towards peace based on discarding their strategy of military force, which led to the occupation of Palestinian, Syrian and Lebanese territories, the Israeli decision makers are still yearning to pursue the same strategy by restoring their lost military deterrence. Towards this end, they have made war itself and warmongering legitimate tools of electoral campaigning as illustrated by “Operation Cast Lead” against the Palestinian people in Gaza, which dominated the campaign for February 10 elections.

Those elections were “ Israel ’s War Referendum,” according to the editorial of The Washington Times on February 9; they were “A Promise of War,” Jackson Diehl wrote in The Washington Post on the same day. “The past four Israeli elections have been won by a candidate who promised to end Israel ’s conflict with the Palestinians. Tomorrow, for the first time in decades, Israelis may choose a prime minister who is promising to wage war,” Diehl said. This development in the Israeli political system and the ominous outcome of Tuesday’s election do not bode well for the Palestinian people or for the regional stability and peace.

Judging by the statements on record of the four major contenders for premiership (Netanyahu, Livni, Barak and Lieberman) and the political platforms of the five main parties (Likud, Kadima, Labor, Yesrael Betteinu and Shas) of the thirty-three party lists who competed for some of the 120 seats of the Knesset among an estimated five million voters on February 10, “security and defense,” Hamas, the Palestinian resistance in the Gaza strip and Iran were the key issues in the election campaign. The so-called “peace process” was written off or at least sidelined to the back burner.

An Existential Conflict

While all the winners on Tuesday were in consensus on how to deal with Iran “by all means,” according to Netanyahu, their consensus is not as much clear on how to deal with Hamas “by all means” as well. Livni’s stated lone subscription to the “Annapolis Process” may blur the fact that she was a member of the tripartite leadership with Barak and Olmert who were responsible for the bloody onslaught by the region’s self –proclaimed “invincible” military force on the civilian infrastructure and the civilian population of one and a half million Palestinians, more than seventy percent of whom are displaced refugees from the Israeli 1948 onslaught on their civilian existence in their original homeland that had become Israel ever since.

In a key speech last Monday Livni promised more attacks and ruled out any chance of a negotiated settlement with Hamas. "If by ending the operation we have yet to achieve deterrence, we will continue until they get the message," she said, insisting on ignoring both the message of recent history since 1973 that "that" deterrence has irreversibly eroded by Arab state regular armies, but more by Palestinian and Lebanese popular resistance to military occupation, and the message that the "inconclusiveness" of Israeli wars against this resistance promises more erosion of the deterrence she and her rivals aspire for, especially in the Palestinian case because if the Lebanese civilians, for example, can flee north and east Palestinian refugees in Gaza as well as in the West Bank have no escape, but to join the resistance, and have no Syrian "strategic depth" like their Pan - Arab compatriots in Lebanon and their only strategic outlet is ironically Israel proper itself.

Abraham Diskin, a political scientist at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, was right when he was quoted by The Guardian on February 4 as saying that the "conflict is an existential problem both on a personal and a national basis," but he was partially right when he stated that only "Kadima failed" to address it as such. While Netanyahu admitted that Operation Cast Lead was not a success because it was an unfinished mission, Barak's public admission on February 8 that he was running for defense minister, not prime minister, was also an admission that his campaigning militarily in Gaza was a failure that failed to improve his electoral chances. "It was a miscalculation: Brutal discourse and brutal policies always strengthen the far right - Netanyahu and Avigdor Lieberman," co-founder and former director of the Alternative Information Center in Jerusalem , Michael Warschawski, said on Tuesday.

Neither Netanyahu nor Lieberman or Barak seem receptive of those messages of recent history, which have deterred the Israeli strategy of military deterrence twice since 2006, to address the conflict as one of "existence" for both sides as they continue to unilaterally deal with it as only an Israeli headache and not as a bilateral problem of existence for the Palestinian people too who have been resisting the Israeli genocide against their very existence for more than sixty one years.

Netanyahu was on record: "We must smash the Hamas power in Gaza ." "There will be no escape from toppling the Hamas regime." "I'm sorry to say we haven't gotten the job done; the next government will have no choice but to finish the job and uproot . . . the Iranian terror base." Lieberman — who was on record that if it ever came to war, Israel had only to bomb the Aswan Dam to flood the Nile Valley and devastate Egypt — was more horrifying in hinting to "atomic" genocide. He denounced the Israeli unilateral ceasefire in Gaza as a sell-out of the military; his preferred strategy is total war against the Gaza Strip: "We must continue to fight Hamas just like the United States did with the Japanese in World War II." In an opinion column titled, "Kahane Won," Gideon Levy reminded Haaretz readers two days ahead of the election that Lieberman was a member of Kahane's Kach party in his youth and wrote: "Rabbi Meir Kahane can rest in peace: His doctrine has won. Twenty years after his Knesset list was disqualified and 18 years after he was murdered, Kahanism has become legitimate in public discourse ... If Kahane were alive and running for the 18th Knesset, not only would his list not be banned, it would win many votes, as Yisrael Beiteinu is expected to

do.”

The writer is a veteran Arab journalist based in Bir Zeit on the West Bank of the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories. This article was first published by IslamOnline.net on Thursday February 12, 2009.

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