

The Gaza War Strengthened Israel's Far Right

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ODA focused on poverty and unemployment

The results of the elections to Israel's 18th Knesset clearly bolstered the far Right, which won 65 of the parliament's 120 seats. This outcome is partly due to the paralysis that beset Ehud Olmert's government. Almost three years ago he received a mandate to advance the peace process, but he squandered it on two wars. The lack of progress toward peace has had the effect of strengthening Hamas. It has also encouraged chauvinistic trends in Israel, as expressed in wall-to-wall support for the Gaza War. Israelis turned their backs on the notion that the conflict with the Palestinians must be solved by diplomacy.

Avigdor Lieberman, who heads a party called "Israel Our Home," became the elections' main attraction, advancing from 11 to 15 seats and shoving the venerable Labor Party back into fourth position. His campaign slogan went: "No loyalty, no citizenship!" If he weren't Jewish, Lieberman would be an anti-Semite. Hatred for Arabs was his strongest card, pulling in thousands of the like-minded.

The Lieberman surge is largely a result of the Gaza War. His rival parties, Kadima and Labor, timed the offensive prior to elections largely in order to gain popularity, but Lieberman reaped the fruits. The intoxication of force, the abandonment of all restraint –sheer murder – well suited the party of Strong Man Lieberman, who means to teach the Arabs a lesson they won't forget.

For Israel the election results signify a big step backward. In 2005, when PM Ariel Sharon broke from the Likud and established Kadima, it was a severe blow to the right-wing ideal of a Greater Israel. After disengaging from Gaza and dismantling the settlements there, Sharon held that the Right was stuck. He claimed to be moving toward the Center. In the 2006 elections, as a result (but also because the remaining Likud leader, Binyamin Netanyahu, had aroused resentment by welfare cuts in his term as Finance Minister) the Likud plunged to 12 seats.

Any prospect of peace through Kadima, however, quickly lost momentum. Sharon refused to work with the Palestinian moderates, preferring *unilateral* withdrawal. This spared him making concessions in the West Bank, where he wanted to strengthen Israel's hold with American approval. Then he suffered a stroke. Olmert took over. In the 2006 elections, Kadima won 29 seats, far less than the 40 projected while Sharon was at the helm. Olmert, charged with corruption, could not complete his term. Cornered, stripped of political hope, he began to say things unheard of from an Israeli chief-of-state: that the alternative to withdrawal from the West Bank would be a one-state solution where Arabs would be the majority; that the maintenance of a Jewish State would then require apartheid; that Israel under apartheid would not be able to stand up under international pressure. On the ground,

however, Olmert did nothing. The Annapolis program, to which he was partner, remained ink on paper. In the end, his many talks with PA President Abu Mazen produced nothing but “shelf understandings,” stored away for a more auspicious hour.

The strengthening of the Right leaves Israel more entangled than ever. With a Knesset majority that will fade at the slightest concession, the new prime minister faces an American administration seeking regional peace. The prognosis, in short, is for an intensification of Israel’s paralysis. Amid a global economic crisis, however, paralysis will not do. The need for external funding and investment will be greater than ever. This impossible situation will likely breed another round of elections.

Party by party

If Sharon, in his day, moved the electoral map to the left, the recent elections have shifted it back. The Likud recaptured voters disappointed with Kadima, while Kadima—claiming that only a big win could block the hated Netanyahu—took voters from Labor and Meretz. At the same time, Labor and Meretz lost most of their former support in the Arab sector. The result was a major decline. From 24 seats in the 17th Knesset, Labor and Meretz dropped to 16.

This decline reflects the contradictions in which the Left has been mired during years of violence against the Palestinians, as well as in Lebanon. Compare today’s 16 seats to the 56 that Labor and Meretz won in 1992! After the collapse of the Oslo Accords and the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, Labor began to take part in acts of oppression and warfare: “Operation Grapes of Wrath” (which included the mass killing at Kana in Lebanon), the murderous response to the Intifada in the year 2000, “Operation Defensive Shield” (2002), the second Lebanon War (2006) and now the war in Gaza. Labor’s Ehud Barak adopted Sharon’s slogan that “there is no partner.” He supported the concept of unilateralism, which created a vacuum on the Palestinian side that Hamas easily filled.

Meretz, for its part, offered no political alternative. It has supported all the unilateral steps, and now the cruel war in Gaza. Avoiding the need to cope with the difficult political questions, Meretz focused instead on bringing media stars to its fold and building the illusion of a new movement, social-democratic and green. The gimmick flopped. Meretz lost votes to Kadima. Among the leftists who opted for Kadima’s Tzipi Livni, it didn’t much matter that she had been one of the leaders in the Gaza operation. After all, even Meretz supported the war. On the other hand, hundreds of erstwhile Meretz supporters took umbrage at the party’s war position and voted instead for Hadash, which is chiefly an Arab party. In the Jewish sector, Hadash garnered 7500 votes, compared with 3000 in 2006. Thus Meretz lost votes on both sides, rightward to Kadima and leftward to Hadash.

The elections saw a limited achievement for the Arab parties, which raised their number of seats from 10 to 11. They could do so by fully exploiting the rage felt by the Arab sector after the Gaza War. The clan heads and vote contractors, who in the past worked for the Zionist parties (which won 28% of the Arab vote in 2006) found it difficult this time to market Labor or Kadima. Instead, they divided their allegiance equally among the three Arab parties (Hadash, Ra’am-Ta’al and Bal’ad).

The additional Arab seat reflected no increased faith in Arab leadership, but rather a cold calculation by the clan heads, who wanted to maintain their status with the public. These parties offer no realistic action plan for organizing the Arab sector. They shun the burning

questions of poverty and unemployment. Avoiding platforms for action, they perpetuate clan-based vote patterns, which have nothing to do with raising consciousness and organizing the public. We can say, therefore, that their 11 mandates represent so many wasted votes, for they cannot influence the centers of decision-making, nor do they reflect real work in the field. The situation remains the same, which is to say that the Arab sector keeps slipping backward.

What's more, the weakening of the Zionist Left will make it harder for the Arab parties to put through legislation. The Knesset and Israeli public opinion are today full of anti-Arab sentiment. This is fed in part by the development of an impassioned but narrow-minded intra-Arab dialogue, which seeks support by appealing to feelings of bitterness rather than by building social institutions.

The Organization for Democratic Action (ODA-DA'AM), known as the Workers' Party, was also hurt by the shift to the Right. Nevertheless, the election campaign, headed by Asma Aghbarieh-Zahalka, managed to reach new sectors of the public. The failure to cross the Knesset threshold in no way weakens the determination of the party's members to continue building a new kind of social and political power. In an open letter that the party published after the elections, it declared that "ODA refuses to be drawn into clanlike patterns of voting." The ODA election broadcast, produced on a voluntary basis by top professionals, won extremely positive responses. Although these achievements did not translate into sufficient votes, there was an influx of activists into the party's ranks. The open letter also stated that "ODA is determined to continue systematic action toward defending and organizing workers in Israel." The party's social agenda, moreover, is a bridge for common work between Jews and Arabs. It undermines the dangerous attempt to isolate the Arab population and deepen the hatred between the two peoples.

In the shadow of the crisis hanging over the world, including Israel, the issues of poverty and unemployment will stand at the top of ODA's agenda in the coming year.

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