

IL FOGLIO QUOTIDIANO

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"An Israeli Diet: Give Up Land and Rebuild Muscle"

By Kenneth W. Stein

ENGLISH TRANSLATION

Israel's recent parliamentary election results might argue for a talmudic interpretation. No political party won a quarter of the 120 parliamentary seats. Without any political apparatus to turn out the vote, the Kadima Party that did not exist five months ago, secured 29 seats. The man who formed the party, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, lies comatose in a Jerusalem hospital.

Why did Israelis reward Kadima and Olmert? The answer is simple. Israelis want a domestic leader to accomplish two tasks: disengage from the Palestinians and establish a more normal life. Israelis are frustrated with the political stalemate with the Palestinians; they see potential for budding instability in their neighborhood; they want to continue to shape their own future, to make their country stronger and less vulnerable to civilian attacks. Israelis came to a broader conclusion that controlling all the land west of the Jordan River is unhealthy for Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. After two intifadah's, years of brutal terrorist attacks against civilians, a negotiating process that ended on a cul de sac, an economy that was battered by unrest, and a Palestinian partner that wants to see Israel's destruction, Israelis endorsed unilateral action. Israelis voted for continuity. Olmert and his party won a plurality.

Israeli consensus is that if Hamas wants separation, they can have separation. Put differently, Palestinians voted for Hamas, "let the Palestinians cook in their own juices." Regionally, Israelis see political and economic uncertainty in their neighborhood. With implicit faith in their military and national security services to protect them, Israelis understand that potential threats exist from sources as diverse as Hizballah, Syria, Iran, and al-Qaeda. With all the face cards in the negotiating deck, Israelis have concluded they only need to negotiate with themselves.

When compared to previous elections, these were the least exciting in Israel's 58 years. No major foreign policy issue electrified the voting public. No major problem separated Israel from its major patron, the United States. The international community was on the same page on the war against terrorism. The EU and the UN were lining up against

Iran. No European countries individually, nor the EU itself collectively, particularly after snuggling up to Arafat for decades made any negative noises directed toward Israel since the Hamas election. There was no major terrorist attack against Israel or Israelis in the months and days before this national election to drive uncertain voters rightward. There was no concerted Palestinian violence occurring on Israel's borders. And Jordan and Egypt, countries with peace treaties with Israel were quietly urging compromise from the Palestinians. And only one charismatic leader was contending for the electorate's attention this time, former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. And his Likud party was soundly defeated. Netanyahu's usual election ploy of trying to scare the electorate gained no traction. Other long time party leaders retired from government, did not run, or changed party allegiances. New faces including academics, practitioners and technocrats are to replace old, worn, and less experienced ones.

Israelis want to give up land that is too costly to keep and redirect expenditures from settlements to solving a myriad of socio-economic issues. Normally, after Israeli elections, keen competition emerges between party leaders for who gets the defense and foreign affairs portfolio; this time the competition will unfold over which parties hold positions in the ministries of interior, finance, housing, and social welfare. Olmert's problems will not lie in creating a coalition, but in trying to find the funds to meet the simultaneous costs for withdrawal and for meeting the socio-economic needs for pensions, bettering education, expanding mass transit, and protecting the environment. The debate in Israel will focus on whether non-defense expenditures should go to ameliorate conditions of poverty or compensate 65,000 settlers or more.

What happens next? Olmert will try and form a coalition that represents a broad parliamentary majority. In writing the coalition agreements, understandings and promises will be made asserting unconditional commitments to specific priorities. In the coming weeks and months, one can expect some present political leaders to be sacked because of poor electoral performance. Inevitably many of the smaller parties that rely on government funding for their educational and social welfare needs will join the coalition initially, but down the road when the time comes to actually withdraw from the territories, some of these parties will leave the coalition. Their departure will not jeopardize a unilateral withdrawal however. What kind of pressure can Israel expect from the international community? Very little. Israel will not be pushed to negotiate with Hamas, a terrorist group that seeks its destruction. With the United States election cycle gearing up for 2006 congressional and 2008 presidential elections, it is unlikely that the White House will be drawing

borders for Israel's withdrawal. Likewise, with the EU becoming so big so fast that you need binoculars to see around the table, and with pressing economic, immigration, and integration issues to manage, another eye cast at Iran, Iraq, and oil needs, a concerted European foray into Palestinian-Israeli negotiations is also highly unlikely.

At this moment in their national history, Israelis have chosen to consolidate their strength. They have chosen unilateralism. Sharon left Olmert and Israelis with an enviable legacy. By comparison, Arafat left the Palestinians with Hamas and the opposite.

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