

Israel Under Another Netanyahu Government

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Forty-five years into Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories and four years after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government became the undertaker of the two-state solution, an electoral campaign run in utter denial of Israel's Palestinian conundrum has just ended with yet another Netanyahu government in office. Yes, Netanyahu was humbled by the electorate, but his loss of support was not a victory for the peace camp. The victors were an amorphous political center focused on domestic issues and the annexationist religious right.

A country whose modern economy is fully integrated into the global system and whose conflict with the Palestinians has for decades drawn the attention of the global media and the major world powers went to the polls as if it were a separate, secluded planet.

Parties in the center campaigned for "social justice" and for a requirement that ultrareligious students "share the burden" of military service, from which they have been exempt since Israel's founding. Their platform also contained a defense of the country's struggling middle

class.

With opinion polls indicating that only 18 percent of the electorate was concerned with the Palestinian problem, the Labor Party refrained from even mentioning the peace process, lest it alienate potential voters. Labor's current leader, Shelly Yachimovich, superseded the fatalism of her predecessor, Ehud Barak, who maintained that the Palestinian conflict has no solution, with the politics of denial. She refused to even acknowledge that there is a problem.

Israel's life in a bubble was also exemplified by the two major religious parties in the elections. Shas, led by a 92-year-old rabbi, combined its traditional defense of the have-nots with its fight for stricter rules for conversion to Judaism, an undisguised allusion to Israel's masses of Russian immigrants with doubtful Jewish credentials. Meanwhile, Jewish Home, a party linked to fanatical, messianic rabbis, challenged Netanyahu to adopt a more expansionist policy in Palestinian territories.

Demographers warn that the Jewish and Arab populations between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean will reach parity this year. From that point on, the specter of a Jewish minority ruling over an Arab majority in an apartheid state is bound to become a reality, turning Israel into an international pariah, unless a more sober coalition replaces Netanyahu's suicidal alliance with religious fundamentalists and extreme nationalists.

The good news is that these elections make such a change of alliances politically inevitable. Always a politician in search of a platform to sustain his lust for power, Netanyahu is now forced to change course and form a centrist government. The remarkable success of Yair Lapid's new centrist party, Yesh Atid, makes it practically impossible for Netanyahu to form a right-wing coalition with his traditional allies from the lunatic fringe.

Will this be enough to revitalize the moribund peace process and reach a settlement with the Palestinians? Not really. The radicalization of Netanyahu's Likud Party does not augur well for the chances of a robust peace process. Those prospects will diminish further if the annexationist Jewish Home, with whose domestic platform Lapid fully concurs, joins a Likud-Yesh Atid government.

Moreover, Lapid himself is far from being an especially forthcoming peacemaker. He remains in a fantasy world in which peace with the Palestinians can be achieved for less than what previous left-wing governments offered.

Sadly, the so-called peace camp, now in opposition, is in complete disarray. Faithless and wavering, it has been defeated by the unswerving conviction of the right. Its demise reflects the destructive power of the narrative about the peace process that the right succeeded in persuading many Israelis to accept.

The right's narrative is simple. The Oslo Accords ushered in an era of bus explosions in Israel's main cities. The Second Intifada, with its waves of suicide terrorist attacks that slaughtered hundreds of innocent civilians, followed the Israeli concessions offered at the 2000 Camp David summit. What's more, the withdrawal from Gaza ushered in a Hamas government that has overseen routine missile attacks on Israel.

Little wonder that once most Israelis accepted this narrative, the "peace process" became a repulsive, discredited expression, and its advocates on the left came to be perceived at best as innocents detached from the real world. Indeed, instead of facing the region's changing realities with a new approach to peace in Palestine and beyond — endorsing the Arab peace initiative, for example — the Israeli left and center retreated either to worn-out slogans or to the safety of domestic agendas. These parties made no effort to reach out to the new regimes and the rising new generations in the public squares of the Arab world.

The bottom line, however, is that even the domestic issues that loomed so large in the election can never be addressed effectively without regard for the colossal sums that Netanyahu and his allies have been pouring into the occupation system in Palestinian lands. Nor should Israelis ignore what former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert described as "megalomaniacal preparations" for an attack on Iran "that would never happen."

Israelis now seem to believe that their politicians can choose which problems should be solved and which should be ignored. As a result, they are bound to be disappointed. Israeli leaders have never had that choice.

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