

## CRITICAL QUESTIONS

**Deciphering the Israeli Elections**

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Jon B. Alterman and Haim Malka

**Q1: What effects have the actions in Gaza had on Israeli public opinion?**

**A1:** For most Israelis, the Gaza war changed very little. A strong majority supported the initial invasion of Gaza to punish Hamas for ongoing rocket attacks. Yet, many also believe that the attacks on Gaza failed to remove the Hamas threat and that the government ended the operation prematurely. Approximately 1 million Israeli citizens remain within range of Hamas's current rockets, and the reach of those rockets is likely to grow. Most Israelis have grown skeptical that their government has a strategy for confronting a range of Israel's security challenges.

**Q2: What is the most likely outcome of the Israeli elections?**

**A2:** The gap between the Likud and Kadima parties has narrowed significantly in the last few days, partially due to the growth of the ultranationalist Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel is our home) party. The party, dominated by Russian immigrants, has lured thousands of voters away from Likud with its right-wing message, making the election outcome less certain than it was only a week ago.

In Israel's political system, the leader of the party that wins the most parliamentary seats has the first opportunity to form a coalition government. Should Likud win—as the polls suggest is still likely—it will find natural partners in Yisrael Beiteinu and the ultraorthodox Shas party. Likud leader Binyamin Netanyahu has declared a preference for forming a national unity government that would bring in rival parties, and it is possible that a Likud-led coalition government would include some combination of Labor and Kadima. Netanyahu appears to prefer to include Labor in his coalition, retaining Defense Minister and Labor party leader Ehud Barak in his current post. Doing so would give his government more of a centrist cast. It would also undermine the Kadima party, which was formed in late 2005 with the defection of a large number of center-leaning Likud members. Netanyahu would like to lure back many of those who left the party and watch Kadima wither in the opposition.

Kadima would probably have a harder time forming a center-left coalition. Indeed, it failed to do so after Prime Minister Ehud Olmert resigned in September 2008, precipitating these elections. If Kadima tries to form a coalition and fails, Israel's president would invite the leader of the second-largest vote getter—presumably, Likud in this case—to form a government.

**Q3: What are the prospects for Israeli diplomacy with Palestinians and Syrians after the elections?**

**A3:** Most Israelis believe there is little prospect for successful Israeli-Palestinian negotiations now. Many are open to reaching some sort of limited modus vivendi both with the Palestinian Authority and Hamas but have little faith that either would guarantee their security in the long run. To the extent that there are diplomatic efforts, they will likely focus on palliative measures such as improving Palestinian economic conditions, removal of checkpoints in the West Bank, and strengthening West Bank security forces.

The lack of prospects to advance a comprehensive Israeli-Palestinian agreement could lead Israel to refocus energy on talks with Syria. Such talks could pressure Palestinians to be more forthcoming, help blunt criticism that Israel is doing little to move forward on the Palestinian front, and perhaps moderate Syrian support for Hamas and Hezbollah. Despite widespread skepticism about whether a comprehensive Israeli-Syrian deal could be struck, many in Israeli politics and the Israeli defense establishment favor renewed diplomacy with Syria. The Obama administration's seeming openness to supporting Israeli diplomacy with Syria—in stark contrast to the Bush administration's position—makes this both more likely and more attractive to many Israelis.

**Q4: What are the competing schools of Israeli thought about how to deal with Hamas in the longer term?**

**A4:** Israelis differ on whether to defer a conflict with Hamas or continue efforts to crush it as soon as possible. Ehud Barak has been an advocate of reaching a cease-fire, at least for now. Many others complain that the only way to deal with

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Hamas is to deal it a far more decisive military defeat than Israel did a month ago. In between, many Israelis talk of a need to periodically repeat large-scale military operations every few months in order to cripple the organization. Even those who advocate a cease-fire do not rule out occasional military operations, and very few Israelis believe that engaging with Hamas can moderate the organization.

**Q5: Would a hawkish Israeli government clash with the Obama administration?**

**A5:** The Obama administration has sought early engagement on Arab-Israeli issues in part to tamp down violence, in part to build international support, and in part to demonstrate its distinctiveness from the Bush administration. Sustaining high-level effort for more than a year will be difficult in the absence of an Israeli determination to move forward on diplomacy. While the Kadima party leader, Tzipi Livni, has talked about the centrality of Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy to Israeli national security, Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu is much more skeptical that there is any diplomatic solution to Israel's security challenges. A year from now, that could create tension between a U.S. government determined to push ahead and an Israeli government determined to dig in its heels. On a practical level, tension would likely arise on the issues of Israeli settlement policy and Israel's use of force.

Yet, Israelis from across the political spectrum see that as an undesirable outcome. In preelection interviews, Netanyahu emphasized that he has had positive meetings with Obama, and he has been eager to demonstrate that he can work with both President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. He will seek to avoid any tension with the Obama administration, and it is conceivable that Netanyahu would enter talks with the Palestinian Authority to satisfy U.S. requests.

Nonetheless, a hawkish Israeli government will be wary of Obama's penchant for engagement, especially with Iran. Many security-focused Israeli strategists argue that engagement in the Middle East is interpreted as weakness and hurts the interests of both Israel and the United States. They still see a military option to block Iran's development of nuclear enrichment and weapons capability as possible and have little faith in international efforts to pressure Iran.

*Jon B. Alterman is director and senior fellow and Haim Malka deputy director and fellow with the Middle East Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.*

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