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The 2009 Israeli Elections and Turkish-Israeli Relations

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ABSTRACT

The 2009 election results in Israel indicate that right-wing votes have increased remarkably, and that the center-left and left have lost one third of their combined representational power. Based on the results, although a few other coalition alternatives are numerically possible, two options seem most probable today: a Likud-Kadima unity government or a right wing government. While the Likud-Kadima unity government would be the better option for the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, both governments would seek to strike a deal with Syria and have to follow more or less the same procedures to deal with Iran. Since the recent course of Turkish-Israeli relations has been mainly defined by Israeli policies toward the Palestinians and the peace process, the next Israeli government's peace agenda will be crucial for the future course of Turkish-Israeli relations.



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THE 2009 ISRAELI ELECTIONS AND TURKISH-ISRAELI RELATIONS

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On February 10, 2009, early general elections were held in Israel because of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's resignation from the Kadima Party's leadership and his successor Tzipi Livni's failure to form a new government. This policy brief aims to analyze the 2009 elections in Israel and assess the probable effects of the results on regional politics in general, and on Turkish-Israeli relations in particular. It also gives policy recommendations to Turkey regarding its relations with Israel.

Israel has an electoral system based on nationwide proportional representation, wherein "the number of seats which every list receives in the 120 seats Knesset is proportional to the number of voters who voted for it. The only limitation is the 2 percent qualifying threshold."² The electoral system enables many small parties to be represented in the Knesset, rendering a highly fragmented political system. For this reason, since 1948, Israeli governments have always been formed by coalitions, except for the "Alignment government" between 1968 and 1969. Traditionally, the president gives the mandate to the party leader with the highest number of seats in the parliament or to the one considered to have the best chance of forming a viable coalition. The prime minister-designate has four weeks to muster a coalition of at least 61 seats in the Knesset.

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2. http://www.knesset.gov.il/deSCRIPTION/eng/eng_mimshal_beh.htm

The election results indicate that right-wing votes have increased remarkably, and that the center-left and left have lost one third of their combined representational power.

The Election Results and Their Significance

The election results did not come as a surprise, since earlier polls were projecting the rise of the right-wing bloc, the demise of the left parties, and a very close race between the Kadima and Likud parties slightly in favor of Benjamin Netanyahu. In the 2009 election, the right-wing parties (Likud, Yisrael Beiteinu, National Union and Jewish Home) received 49 seats; the religious parties (Shas and United Torah Judaism) received 16; the center, center left and left parties (Kadima, Labor, and Meretz) received 44; and the Arab parties (Hadash, Balad, United Arab List) received 11 seats to form the 18th Knesset.³ The results indicate that right-wing votes have increased remarkably, and that the center-left and left have lost one third of their combined representational power.

Another possible way of assessing the outcome of the election is that the governing parties have lost support, while the opposition parties have widened their platforms by lodging substantial criticisms against the government. Major criticisms include the controversial withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, the unsuccessful Lebanon War of 2006, and the unfinished “Operation Cast Lead” in Gaza. The right-wing parties argue that Ariel Sharon’s withdrawal from Gaza was a socially disastrous and strategically flawed move, creating security gaps that have put the lives of the people living in the southern provinces in danger and apparently nurtured terrorism. The Lebanon War, argue the same parties, was mishandled by the government. The right-wing also contends that any operation in Gaza that stops without destroying Hamas is a failure, and that the government’s sub-optimal handling of the Gaza operation will cost Israeli lives in the near future. The right-wing utilized these security-related criticisms to its benefit, and won the votes of many Israelis who feel that the current government has compromised their security priorities. Understandably, right-wing parties scored landslide victories in the cities bordering or within Hamas rocket range, such as Ashkelon, Sderot and Beer Sheva.

Behind the demise of the left lie several factors, such as strong right-wing opposition, an agitated public opinion on security issues, corruption allegations, and the fear of a possible far-right coalition. Although Labor’s popularity rose during the early phase of Operation Cast Lead (because party leader and Defense Minister Ehud Barak was commanding the operation), ongoing rocket fire from Gaza and every other sign that showed that Hamas was still operative reversed the favorable situation for Labor and

3. The exact distribution of the seats for major parties are as follows: Kadima: 28, Likud, 27, Israel Beiteinu: 15, Labor: 13, and Shas: 11.

its leader.⁴ The leftist Meretz party, which has traditionally been anti-war, first made a very rare call for military action in Gaza to be carried out “without compromise and narrow political considerations,”⁵ and then protested the Gaza operation.⁶ The party’s unusual call for military action confused the many Meretz supporters who are also longtime peace activists, and probably contributed to a fall in its votes.

The fear factor played a significant role in the demise of the left, Likud’s rise, and Kadima’s narrow win in the election.⁷ The fear of a possible far-right coalition had an impact on both center-left and left votes as well as far-right votes. The rise of the far-right diverted Labor and Meretz votes toward Kadima, which was regarded as the only viable alternative to the far-right coalition. In sectors such as the Kibbutzim (farming communes), where the left is traditionally strong, the centrist party Kadima received an unprecedented number of votes. On the other hand, far-right voters who had been wavering between Yisrael Beitenu’s Avigdor Lieberman and Likud’s Netanyahu mostly opted for Netanyahu due to the fear that the far-right would bring international disfavor.⁸

The 2009 election once again demonstrated Israel’s political fragmentation and religious and social heterogeneity. It was a race in which the right competed with the center and left, Zionists clashed with Arabs, and the religious parties quarreled with the seculars. The most striking example was the quarrel between the secular Zionist Yisrael Beitenu and the religious Shas. Referring to the former’s secularizing agenda, the spiritual leader of the latter, renowned scholar Ovadia Yosef, said, “whoever votes for Lieberman gives strength to the Satan.”⁹ Rabbi Yosef later called the Lieberman supporters, predominantly young Russian immigrants, “infidels.”¹⁰

For many Israelis the 2009 election was not “at all a matter of picking the candidate they like the most, ... [nor] even a matter of picking the lesser of many, many evils. Rather, their vote [was] really merely a tool to help stave off the person they hate or fear the most.”¹¹ In particular, the far-right Yisrael Beitenu’s campaign directed against Israeli Arabs and the ultra-Orthodox sectors galvanized many voters who had either previously planned to boycott or were indifferent about the elections into changing their minds and exercising their citizenship.

The 2009 election once again demonstrated Israel’s political fragmentation and religious and social heterogeneity.

4. “Poll: Labor, National Union on the Rise,” *Arutz Sheva*, January 5, 2009. One could also argue that Barak’s multi-million dollar Tel Aviv apartment and his wife’s controversial business which she closed following a wave of public criticism damaged his image among many Labor supporters.

5. Roni Zinger-Heruti, “Meretz Koret Lehakot beHamas,” *Haaretz*, December 25, 2008.

6. Jaki Khouri and Ofri Ilani, “Meretz: Leatsor at haLhima biHeskem,” *Haaretz*, January 10, 2009.

7. See Robert Mackey, “Fear More of a Factor than Hope as Israel Votes,” *The New York Times*, February 10, 2009.

8. Tovah Lazaroff, “Ma’aleh Adumim Teeters between Netanyahu and Lieberman,” *Jerusalem Post*, February 9, 2009.

9. Yair Ettinger, “Mi She Yatzbia Avor Lieberman Noten Koah leSatan,” *Haaretz*, February 8, 2009.

10. “Lieberman: Sherut Leumi LeHaredim; Shas: Anti-Yahudi,” *Yediot Aharonot*, February 5, 2009.

11. Benjamin L. Hartman, “Lieber-fear and Bibi-phobia,” *Haaretz*, February 10, 2009.

It may be claimed that the Likud-Kadima unity government would be the better option for peace talks, and would enjoy more legitimacy than a right-wing government.

Coalition Possibilities and Their Implications for Israeli Foreign Policy

Although a few other coalition alternatives are numerically possible, two options seem most probable today: a Likud-Kadima unity government or a right wing government. A Likud-Kadima unity government backed by either Shas or Yisrael Beitenu stands out as the strongest possibility. Although party pamphlets may say otherwise, there is no unbridgeable gap between Likud and Kadima. However, the major drawback to this option would be the leadership question. Tzipi Livni has declared on several occasions that she would prefer going to the opposition instead of constantly remaining second in charge in the government. A possible solution to this problem would be a rotating coalition, which would give both Netanyahu and Livni equal opportunity to lead the government. However, Netanyahu has seemingly ruled out the possibility of a rotation agreement between himself and Livni.¹² There is still some possibility that Netanyahu can persuade Livni to join the government, but this will definitely require several substantial offers and concessions by Netanyahu to Livni.

After the election results were announced, many watchers hastily projected a right-wing coalition. Such a coalition would have to be backed by the religious parties Shas and United Torah Judaism (UTJ) to reach the magical number 61. However, there is an unbridgeable chasm between Shas and Yisrael Beitenu, an anti-religious status quo party. Almost all the principles Yisrael Beitenu stands for, such as obligatory national service,¹³ as well as conversion and civil marriage issues, pose existential threats to Shas. In order for these two parties to join the same coalition, either Yisrael Beitenu would have to give up all of its plans regarding domestic politics – except for those aimed exclusively at Israeli Arabs – or Shas would have to be willing to join the government without the veto power it has enjoyed in previous governments (to prevent electoral reform and changes in the religious status quo).¹⁴ Neither option seems highly probable now.

It may be claimed that the Likud-Kadima unity government would be the better option for peace talks, and would enjoy more legitimacy than a right-wing government. Livni is known for her support of the two-state solution. Netanyahu is not against it per se, but he believes that a two-state solution is not attainable without economic development.¹⁵ International insistence on the two-state solution, especially by the United States, might make the unity government follow the road map for the establishment of a Palestinian

12. Gil Ronen, "Netanyahu: Rotation with Livni is not an Option," *Arutz Sheva*, February 21, 2009.

13. See <http://beytenu.org.il/126/2288/article.html>

14. Gil Hoffman, "Netanyahu Prepares to Form Narrow Gov't as Kadima Ops Out," *Jerusalem Post*, February 19, 2009.

15. <http://www.netanyahu.org.il/נושאים-ליסדר-יום/בטחון> (accessed February 10, 2009).

state. Although Likud and Kadima could agree on the settlements issue, the status of Jerusalem would be a major point of disagreement. The right-wing coalition, on the other hand, would most likely limit Israel's ability to advance in peace talks, since most of the factions in such a government would oppose a divided Jerusalem, the evacuation of settlements, and ultimately a Palestinian state living alongside Israel.

Although a right-wing coalition would complicate the peace process, at the end of the day both coalitions would seek to strike a deal with Syria. Kadima seemed willing to start direct talks with Syria via Turkey's mediation before the Gaza operation, and Netanyahu demonstrated the same willingness while he was in office in 1998. Even the hawkish Lieberman considers a peace agreement with Syria based on his "peace for peace" principle.¹⁶ In fact, peace with Syria and dealing with the Iranian threat will be at the top of the next government's diplomatic agenda regardless of which parties form the government. The perception of an imminent Iranian threat by Israelis, and the Turkish government's continuing willingness to support peace talks between Israel and Syria, as well as Syria's declared willingness to resume indirect talks with Israel under the mediation of Turkey¹⁷ increase the possibility of reaching a deal with Syria during the term of the next government.

A Likud-Kadima unity government or a right-wing government would have to follow more or less the same procedures to deal with Iran.¹⁸ A military operation against Iran without the backing of the United States would be highly unlikely. Therefore, one may argue that the American policy toward Iran will largely determine the course of Israeli policy. The current signs of rapprochement between the United States and Iran might compel Israel to abandon military options and seek a diplomatic path to deal with a "nuclear" Iran.

Kadima's election campaign emphasized that the nature of the relationship between President Obama and Israel would be up to the new Israeli government, indicating that "Obama could work well with Livni, while Netanyahu clashes with him."¹⁹ Throughout his election campaign, Netanyahu tried to refute this claim, mentioning that he had had positive meetings with Obama, and that he was ready to work with both President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Netanyahu would definitely avoid any tension with the new American administration, which in return might put him on track with peace talks especially, with Syria and the Palestinians. The key factors determining

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16. See <http://beytenu.org.il/85/2636/article.html>

17. Hilary Leila Kreiger, "Assad Ready to Resume Indirect Talks," *Jerusalem Post*, February 1, 2009.

18. See <http://kadima.org.il/upload/file/medinit.pdf> and <http://www.netanyahu.org.il/נושאים-לסדר-יום/בטחון> (accessed February 10, 2009). Avigdor Lieberman also sees the imposition of heavy financial and economic sanctions on Iran as the only way to curb Iran's nuclear ambitions. See <http://beytenu.org/122/1600/article.html>

19. Nathan Jeffay, "Relationship with Obama Also on Ballot As Israelis Vote," *Forward*, February 5, 2009.

the future of American-Israeli relations would then be the Obama administration's relations with Iran and Hamas.

Since the recent course of Turkish-Israeli relations has been mainly defined by Israeli policies toward the Palestinians and the peace process, the next Israeli government's peace agenda will be crucial for the future course of Turkish-Israeli relations. Considering Turkey's foreign policy vision, one may argue that a Likud-Kadima unity government could offer better prospects for Turkish-Israeli relations than a right-wing government. It should be noted that a unity government would also be preferred by the United States and the European Union, as indicated by the unofficial utterances of several US and EU officials.²⁰

Because of its international backing and stronger political base, Netanyahu himself seems to prefer a Likud-Kadima unity government over a right-wing one. Given Netanyahu's preference for a Likud-Kadima unity government, the chasm between Shas and Yisrael Beitenu, and international disfavor for a right-wing government make the latter option less probable than the former.

The Future of Turkish-Israeli Relations and the Peace Process

Although Turkey was the first—and for a long time, the only—Muslim state to recognize the State of Israel, Turkish-Israeli relations were kept at a minimum level for decades. However, the end of the Cold War gave a new *raison d'être* to the relations, and several economic, military and educational treaties were signed between the two states starting in the 1990s. The increasing volume of relations, the countries' parallel views about the Middle East,²¹ and, most importantly, the perception of a common enemy (Syria, Iraq and Iran), carried Turkish-Israeli relations to the next level, a strategic partnership. Both states then perceived themselves as being surrounded by the same hostile "rogue" states, and this perception motivated each to accept the other as a valuable strategic partner in a generally hostile political environment.

However, since the early 2000s Turkish foreign policy has experienced a fundamental change, and Turkey's regional and global role, its relations with the countries of the Middle East, and its long-lasting international disputes have been redefined. Examples of this ongoing process include Turkish rapprochement with Syria and Armenia, friendly

20. Natasha Mazgovoya, "U.S., EU indicate they prefer Kadima-Likud unity government in Israel," *Haaretz*, February 14, 2009.

21. See Efraim Inbar, "The Resilience of Israeli-Turkish Relations," *Israel Studies*, Vol. 11, No.4, October 2005, pp. 591-607.

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relations with Iran, overtures toward a solution to the Cyprus issue, and increasing Turkish interest in Middle Eastern affairs and Arab-Israeli peace talks. As a result of Turkey's new foreign policy, Turkey no longer feels threatened and isolated in the Middle East, and has increasingly improved relations with its neighbors. Consequently, the Turkish-Israeli "strategic partnership" has lost some steam. It seems that this partnership does not offer as much to Turkey as it once did. Ironically, Israel's isolation in the region and need for the strategic partnership continue.

The future of Turkish-Israeli relations must therefore be analyzed in light of Turkey's new foreign policy. Israel, like many other regional and global actors, is aware of this policy shift, which ultimately gave Turkey the upper hand in its relations with Israel.²² In other words, Turkey nowadays has more to offer to Israel than vice versa: in return for military technology provided by Israel and diplomatic support in Washington from the pro-Israel lobby, Turkey, as a strategic partner, provides Israel with invaluable military cooperation, lucrative arms deals, the use of airspace, a safe and cheap outlet for Israeli tourists, and, last but not least, the unique Turkish ability to mediate between Israel and Syria, Israel and the Palestinians, and possibly with other Arab countries and Iran in the future.²³

Both Netanyahu and Livni would most likely seek assistance from Turkey for peace talks, especially with Syria. This would provide a risk-free opportunity for Israel to improve its political standing and security in the region. In this process Turkey has proved to be a willing and able partner to both the Israeli and the Syrian sides. However, the next Israeli government needs to take into consideration the fact that the unique opportunity provided by Turkish mediation may not continue indefinitely. It would not be wild speculation to claim that the latest Israeli offensive in Gaza severely harmed the talks between Israel and Syria. From the Turkish perspective, it is mainly Israeli policies that will determine the future of peace talks between Israel and Syria, and it would be in Israel's best political interests to demonstrate a determination to resume the indirect talks facilitated by Turkish mediation and to move the talks to the next level.

Turkey's foreign policy vision aims to establish a lasting peace in the Middle East; a key component of this vision is a future Palestinian state living side by side with Israel. This vision has also rendered the peace process a crucial dimension of Turkish-Israeli relations. Turkey has declared its support for the two-state solution and offered its

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22. See Zvi Bar'el, "Lamrot ha milhama hamilolit beyn Israel l'Turkiya," *Haaretz*, February 21, 2009.

23. Another sign of Israel's awareness of this situation is the latest apology issued by Israeli Chief of General Staff Lt. Gen. Gabi Ashkenazi for the critical remarks made by OC Ground Forces Command Maj. Avi Mizrahi. Ashkenazi assured his Turkish counterpart Gen. Ilker Basbug that "Mizrahi's remarks did not reflect the IDF's official position, and that Israel highly valued the strategic relationship it had forged over the years with the Turkish military."

The next Israeli government would be well advised to reconsider Turkey's role as a willing and able facilitator in the peace process.

help to both parties on many occasions, help that has included but is not limited to issues related to the release of the captive soldier Gilat Shalit, the construction of a medical compound for Palestinians on the Israeli side of the Jalameh crossing, and the revitalization of the Erez industrial zone in Gaza. However, these offers, aimed at promoting peace and security, have been apparently turned down by Israeli authorities. It would be in the best political interest of both sides of the conflict to consider the great potential of Turkey, which has yet to be utilized effectively, in facilitating a solution to the Palestinian question. The next Israeli government, which will most probably be formed by Netanyahu, would be well advised to reconsider Turkey's role as a willing and able facilitator in the peace process.

Finally, one possible area of contention between the next Israeli government (especially a right-wing one) and the Turkish government could be the Turkey's acceptance of Hamas as a legitimate and democratically elected representative of the Palestinian people. Turkey supports the idea that Hamas must be included in any further peace talks,²⁴ and to this end, Turkey is working to pull Hamas to the center and create a basis for reconciliation between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority. These efforts are quite important for the future of peace talks because, as a result of the recent Israeli offensive in Gaza, the legitimacy of Hamas within Gaza and the other Palestinian territories has increased immensely.²⁵ A significant portion of the Palestinian population now sees Hamas, which benefited from the "rally round the flag" phenomenon, as a legitimate defender and representative of their people. In the case of Hamas's inclusion in the peace talks, directly or indirectly – which no longer seems an impossible prospect – Turkey would stand to gain a key role in the peace process. And this new role would bring a new dimension to Turkish-Israeli relations.

Policy Recommendations

Relations between Turkey and Israel, which deteriorated during Israel's Gaza operation (and at the World Economic Forum), will recover as both countries benefit from their ongoing ties, albeit to different degrees. Even under a right-wing government, Israel would probably seek better relations with Turkey, and Turkey, which aims for zero conflict in the region, would reciprocate.

Relying on the preceding analysis, the following recommendations would be in Turkey's best political interest:

24. This was recently articulated by former US President Jimmy Carter and Britain's Middle East peace envoy Tony Blair.

25. See Ian Black, "Attacks are only going to strengthen hand of Hamas" *The Guardian*, December 28, 2008. Also see Khaled Abu Toameh, "Palestinian Affairs: If you can't beat 'em, join 'em." *Jerusalem Post*, February 19, 2009.

1. The planned state visit to Israel by President Abdullah Gül which was postponed during Israel's Gaza operation should be made after the new Israeli government is formed with the intention of ameliorating Turkish-Israeli relations in accordance with Turkey's new "multi-dimensional foreign policy."²⁶
2. Turkey should take an active role in Gaza's economic reconstruction. The revitalization of the Erez industrial zone in Gaza, which would be managed by the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey (TOBB), will likely appeal to Netanyahu in conjunction with his economic peace plan as mentioned above. While this project would provide employment for Palestinians and revive the Gazan economy, it would also strengthen Turkey's hand in the region and benefit Turkish industrialists and entrepreneurs.
3. The next Israeli government will likely seek to strike a deal with Syria. Turkey should continue to perform its key role in the Syrian-Israeli peace talks and try to move the talks to the next level, as long as Israel reciprocates Turkey's efforts by refraining from any acts that could harm the development of peace in the region.
4. Turkish authorities should emphasize and make clear that recent public criticism in Turkey of Israel's policies regarding the Palestinians is not indicative of anti-Semitism and that Turkey continues to oppose any and all racism, including anti-Semitism. The criticisms are ultimately political in nature and their content is neither religious nor racist.
5. Turkey should support the cultural activities of associations in Israel founded by Turkish Jews living in Israel, such as Itahdut Yotsei Turkia/Türkiyeliler Birliği (Union of Turkish Jews) and Arkadaş (Friend). These activities should be aimed at curbing the increasing hostility toward Turkey on the part of the Israeli public.
6. Barack Obama's new Middle East policy, and the development of U.S.-Iranian relations need to be examined closely. A possible rapprochement between the United States and Iran, the incorporation of Hamas into the peace talks, and the burgeoning of Syrian-Israeli relations with backing from the United States stand to create paradigm shifts in the Middle East and redefine the roles of regional actors. Turkey should take appropriate actions so that these changes serve its interests.

26. See Ahmed Davutoğlu, "Turkey's Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007," *Insight Turkey*, Vol.10, No.1 (2008), 77-96.

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