



ISRAELI ELECTIONS: ANOTHER FORK IN THE ROAD?

By Bruce Maddy-Weitzman

December 16, 2002

Among the most contradictory features of the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation are the preferences and positions of Israeli public opinion. Surveys consistently show that a majority of the public is prepared to broadly accept the Clinton parameters for a settlement, involving the creation of a Palestinian state, the dismantling of settlements, and some sort of division of Jerusalem. In the absence of a negotiated settlement, an even greater percentage of the Jewish sector favors the concept of unilateral separation, the establishment of a security border, and the consolidation of settlements into a few main blocs.

The Labor Party, led by Amram Mitzna, subscribes wholeheartedly to both of these ideas, while Prime Minister Ariel Sharon favors, at best, a much more limited, long-range interim solution, and this only after the Palestinians eschew violence and undertake fundamental reforms. Yet Mitzna's chances of unseating Ariel Sharon and a Likud-led coalition government appear small, as the public steadfastly rejects blaming Sharon for the unprecedented level of Israeli civilian casualties and economic deterioration during the last two years. Indeed, Sharon's level of toughness in conducting the conflict meets with broad approval by a public which holds the Palestinian side, and Yasser Arafat in particular, responsible for the war. At the same time, a majority of the Israeli public continues to favor the unity government formula, and it appears likely that it will continue to do so, namely a Likud-led government in which the Labor Party will be a junior, but significant partner.

In the short run, this reality holds out little hope for those Palestinians who favor a return to the negotiating table on the basis of the Clinton plan. Liberal and pragmatic Palestinians had drawn encouragement from Mitzna's election in the Labor primary, for it indicated that a significant sector of the Israeli public was seeking a way out of the abyss into which both communities were sliding. It reinforced their own tendency to reevaluate Palestinian strategy and, in particular, to bring about a cessation of suicide bombings and return to the less violent, "popular/mass" tactics of the first intifada.

Indeed, there can be little doubt that large-scale terror attacks will reinforce the Israeli public's support for Sharon's hard-line. Conversely, a whole-hearted public endorsement of Mitzna by the Palestinian leadership, let alone active campaigning among Palestinian Israelis, will drive Jewish voters further to the right.

But even if the Palestinians "behave" during the next six weeks, the chances of defeating Sharon appear small. Israelis' faith in Palestinian good will and intentions has been shattered (and vice versa), meaning that no rapid shifts back towards more conciliatory postures can be expected.

However, it will be a mistake for Palestinians to interpret Sharon's re-election as closing the last option for ameliorating the situation. Despite their standing as the weaker party, what they do does matter, and will continue to help shape the contours of the conflict, including the nature and policies of the next Israeli coalition government.

Just as Palestinians pay close attention to the internal Israeli dialogue, so too are Israeli ears attuned to Palestinian discourse, from Sari Nusseibeh to Hamas. This discourse, as Israelis understand it, does not herald a fundamental softening of the Palestinian position, either tactically or strategically. Nusseibeh, it is understood, is clearly way ahead of the Palestinian curve when it comes to Israel's red line, the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and lands in pre-1967 Israel.

There is a widespread belief within Fatah that violence makes a mockery of Sharon's efforts and that a cessation of violence will be an unwarranted concession to Israel (which mirrors Israeli reluctance to "reward terror" by dismantling settlements and withdrawing from Gaza). The preference within Hamas and Islamic Jihad for a narrow, right-wing Israeli government, and the Palestinian Authority's determination to avoid excessive Palestinian civil strife, suggests that Palestinian violence, and the forceful Israeli response that it brings, will continue to shape the dynamics of the conflict.

What about Arafat? However critical Palestinians may be of Arafat in private, and however much some have come to recognize him as part of the problem, they remain unwilling and/or unable to reduce his centrality, both as a symbol of their struggle and as the leader of their now-tattered institutions. Israelis, for their part, almost unanimously believe that Arafat missed the historic opportunity for an honorable peace agreement, and is not to be trusted. Hence, Mitzna's declaration of his willingness to resume negotiations forthwith with the PA to test its intentions was greeted with derision in Israel, and damaged him politically. On the other hand, the combination of Mitzna's refreshing straight talk and the centrist nature of the Labor list of Knesset candidates may strengthen him among middle-of-the road Israeli voters.

A formal and final end to the 100-year old conflict, let alone a historic reconciliation between the two peoples, is clearly out of reach. Nonetheless, after two years of violent confrontation, mutual brutalization and dehumanization, Israelis and Palestinians both appear to be approaching another crossroad. Clearly, there are external factors which will heavily shape developments in the months ahead, first and foremost the looming US war against Iraq, and its impact on all interested parties. The Israeli elections, by themselves, are unlikely to result in a dramatic shift in Israeli-Palestinian relations. But down the road both communities, and particularly their political and intellectual elites, will again face tough choices, internally and vis-à-vis each other.

*Originally published on the Bitter Lemons website,
www.bitterlemons.org/previous/bl161202ed45.html*
