

Miriam Fendius Elman, “Back to the Future? Revisiting Israel’s 2009 Elections”

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In the Middle East, history has a way of repeating itself. This is certainly true of Israeli politics. In the run-up to the country’s elections this past February, the public’s mood and the candidates’ campaign strategies mirrored those of Spring 1996. Then too, Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel’s current Prime Minister, also eked out a narrow victory against a left-of-center candidate (Shimon Peres, the architect of the Oslo peace agreement and Israel’s current President). And just like in 1996, this past winter Netanyahu once again campaigned on his old promises of being ‘strong on security’ and ‘strong for the economy’. These were the same messages that proved so effective for him and his Likud party in the winter of 1996. Then, the cumulative effect of three months of suicide bombings was enough to undermine public confidence in Peres’s left-of-center government and its peace strategy. Currently, given the inconclusive outcome of the recent Israeli military offensive against Hamas in Gaza, it was inevitable that this time around the Israeli Right—dominated for years by the Likud party—would also do well by pressing home security concerns.

A decade ago Netanyahu’s electoral fortunes were linked to the Palestinian Israeli vote. The same is true today. Over 1.5 million Israelis are Palestinians who comprise 20% of the population. In 1996, Netanyahu won by the slimmest of margins—less than one half of 1%—largely because most Palestinian citizens boycotted the elections in protest to the killing of over 100 men, women and children in an accidental Israeli artillery strike on the UN compound in Kana in southern Lebanon. This time around, Netanyahu and his Likud party have a stronger mandate, but this time too the Palestinian Israeli vote was decisive. It was media depictions of Palestinians from Umm Al Fahm and Nazareth draping themselves with Palestinian flags, chanting support for Hamas, and holding posters with caricatures of Israeli soldiers as Nazi storm troopers that contributed to both Netanyahu’s electoral victory and the meteoric rise of Avigdor Lieberman’s party—Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel is Our Home).¹

Israel’s Arab citizens have been the most vocal and critical of the state’s recent military operations in Lebanon and Gaza. For years, Palestinian Israelis have sought to use the electoral process and peaceful methods of protest to both improve their marginal position in Israel’s society and to challenge the Jewish aspects of the Zionist state. It is important to note that Israelis have largely accepted their right to do so. Palestinian Israelis have long been viewed as a part of a defeated enemy that went to war in order to destroy the fledgling Jewish state. But Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs have also come to realize that they are stuck with each other and over the years they have

¹ See Isabel Kershner, “Israeli Arabs Recoil at Attacks on Gaza as Allegiance to Their Country is Strained,” *New York Times*, January 20, 2008. Garnering a whopping 15 legislative seats, Lieberman’s success at the polls is reminiscent of the ultra orthodox *Shas* (Sephardic Guardians of the Torah) party’s dramatic entry into Israeli politics some 20 years ago, where it too quickly emerged as a pivotal party and in short order became Israel’s third largest. For an overview of Israel’s religious political parties, see Miriam Fendius Elman, “Does Democracy Tame the Radicals? Lessons from Israel’s Jewish Religious Political Parties,” *Asian Security*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2008): 79-99.

accepted Arab-Jewish co-existence. Indeed, there has always been widespread agreement that Arab citizens of Israel are entitled to political and civic equality, and protection from discrimination. This sentiment has led to improvements for Israel's Arab population, even as widespread discrimination in the allocation of funds continues to persist.² As demonstrated by Lieberman's success in the 2009 elections, however, the relationship between Israel's Jewish majority and Arab minority is deteriorating. Consider, for example, Israel's Central Elections committee's motion to disqualify two Arab Israeli political parties from running in the elections on the grounds that they supported terror against Israel and refused to recognize it as a Jewish state. What is remarkable in this case is not that the Supreme Court overturned the ruling. Indeed, Israel's Supreme Court has a long history of supporting civic equality for Israeli Palestinians, an end to discrimination, and the continued political, cultural, educational, and economic integration of the Arab minority into Israeli society.³ Rather, what is remarkable is that this motion in the Elections Committee passed overwhelmingly and with support from representatives from the Labor party—the center-left.

In the days before Israelis went to the polls, the general consensus among political pundits was that a Likud-led governing coalition would be a disaster for the peace process, and a step back for Israeli-Palestinian relations. But such claims have typically rested on Netanyahu's record as Prime Minister from 1996-1999. According to many readings of this period, Netanyahu's actions—in Jerusalem and in the West Bank—drove the nail into the coffin of the Oslo peace process. The received wisdom is that Netanyahu's deliberate delays in implementing Israeli withdrawals coupled with his heavy-handed response to terror contributed to Oslo's demise.⁴ To be sure, Netanyahu undertook some ill-conceived actions in the 1990s that certainly spoiled the spirit of the peace process. His decision in September 1996 to open a tunnel running along the Temple Mount/Noble Sanctuary, ostensibly to increase the number of tourists to the Via Delarosa who would then have access to the wares of Arab merchants at the tunnel's entrance, led to bloody clashes in and around Jerusalem's Muslim and Jewish holy sites which cost the lives of 16 Israelis and 80 Palestinians, and was the first instance in which force was used between Israeli troops and Palestinian security forces since the signing of Oslo. Similarly, his decision to authorize the building of a new Jewish neighborhood of Har Homa at the southern tip of Jerusalem also inflamed passions and sparked renewed violence. In both instances Netanyahu was warned by Israel's security agencies and party allies that these actions would have negative and unexpected outcomes—he went ahead anyway. It is

² Much has been written on Israel's Palestinian citizenry. See, for example, Sammy Smooha, "Arab-Jewish Relations in Israel: a Deeply Divided Society," in Anita Shapira, ed., *Israeli Identity in Transition* (Westport: Praeger, 2004), 31-67 and Nadim Rouhana, "Israel and Its Arab Citizens: Predicaments in the Relationship Between Ethnic States and Ethnonational Minorities," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (June 1998): 277-296. A new book on the topic by Yitzhak Reiter titled *National Minority, Regional Majority: Palestinian Arabs Versus Jews in Israel* will be published this summer by Syracuse University Press.

³ See Chaim Gans, *A Just Zionism: On the Morality of the Jewish State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁴ See, for example, Jeremy Pressman, "The Second Intifada: Background and Causes of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," *The Journal of Conflict Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Fall 2003): 114-141.

thus not surprising that, with Netanyahu once again at the helm of a coalition of parties of the Right and far Right, many believe that Israel will resume a politics of confrontation and war.

The reality, though, is that Netanyahu's tenure as Prime Minister in the 1990s was mixed. In fact, Netanyahu contributed to peace by signing both the Hebron and Wye Plantation accords, making additional territorial concessions to the Palestinian Authority and in areas of paramount historic and religious significance to the Jewish people. A firm believer in the liberal view that economic prosperity fosters peace, the Netanyahu-led ruling coalition is committed to strengthening the noticeable economic rejuvenation that has been taking place in recent months in the West Bank. And Netanyahu has said that he will continue to support US General Keith Dayton's plans to train further Palestinian security forces—enabling the Palestinians to step up, so that Israel's Defense Forces can step down. What is clear from Netanyahu's record of Prime Minister in the 1990s is not that he is incapable of a constructive dialogue with the Palestinians, but that only significant American engagement—coupled with some serious arm-twisting—is likely to bring him to the negotiating table. In this regard, Netanyahu is not unique among Israeli right-of-center politicians. Indeed, the Oslo peace process was kick-started in October 1991 precisely because former President George H. W. Bush threatened to veto 10 billion dollars of loan guarantees requested by Israel to assist in the settling of new Soviet Jewish immigrants. The upshot then was that Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir ended up at the Madrid peace summit despite his firm belief that Israel could achieve neither peace nor security by compromising with the Palestinians.

To be sure, today there are plenty of reasons to be pessimistic about the prospects for peace. When they signed the Oslo peace accords some 15 years ago, Israeli and Palestinian leaders fundamentally transformed the conflict. For the first time they defined each other as legitimate enemies (not terrorists or war criminals), a critical stage in conflict resolution and reconciliation.⁵ Today, however, there is little such mutual regard. After years of suicide bombings, kidnappings and missile attacks, Israelis are fearful that accommodation will be interpreted as a sign of weakness, and many are now increasingly convinced that Palestinians have unlimited aims. That said, most Israelis nevertheless realize that the occupation, long justified on security grounds, has become a security liability in itself. Most Israelis now want a state that will support Zionism and Israel's Jewish identity—and they now accept that relinquishing Jewish settlement in the occupied territories is the only way to achieve this outcome. Indeed, despite claims that the 2009 election results reflect the Israeli public's marked shift to the right, the reality is that the elections have not overturned this new consensus. After all, only 30% of Israelis living in Tel Aviv voted for the right-of-center parties.⁶

From the standpoint of Israel's leaders and its society then, a resumption of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations in the coming months is not impossible. A return to the negotiating table,

⁵ Louis Kriesberg, "The Relevance of Reconciliation Actions in the Breakdown of Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations, 2000," *Peace and Change*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (October 2002): 555-556.

⁶ For more on how broad public support for a policy of Israeli withdrawal from much of the occupied territories emerged in the post-Oslo era, see Dov Waxman, "From Controversy to Consensus: Cultural Conflict and the Israeli Debate Over Territorial Withdrawal," *Israel Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2007): 73-96.

however, will require the inclusion of Hamas—something that no Israeli political party is prepared to endorse, much less the Obama administration. Yet, one of the more consequential missed opportunities in recent years was Israel and America’s unwillingness to engage Hamas in the run up to Palestinian elections in 2006, and during the brief period of Palestinian unity government that followed. Israel and the US had the opportunity to peel away the more pragmatic Hamas leaders in Gaza from the more extremist Syrian faction. None were moderates, but in the months leading up to the 2006 Palestinian elections, some within Hamas were showing signs of mellowing, including voicing an acceptance of a two-state solution—that is, Israel’s right to exist—and a willingness to follow Fatah’s lead in resumed peace negotiations.⁷ Despite these signs that Hamas was retreating from the extremist positions expressed in its founding charter, Israel chose to isolate it and to cut Gaza’s population off from the rest of the world. This is not the way moderates are created, nor is it the way terrorism ends. Peace ultimately requires a more savvy approach to dealing with one’s enemies.

In the final account, though, Israel’s 2009 elections were more about Israel’s identity as a Jewish state than they were about the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The elections highlight a growing rift within Israel—between those who insist that Israel should be a democratic, liberal state with equal opportunities and obligations of all its citizens to the state, and between those who counter that Israeli national self-determination should foster Jewish hegemony in a Jewish nation-state. Unlike liberal democracies that rest on civic notions of nationalism, Israel is an ethnic democracy which institutionally and legally privileges the ethnic Jewish majority. Zionism fundamentally rests on an ethno-cultural nationalism, not a civic one. Yet, throughout Israel’s history there have been attempts to refashion Zionism into an ideology that would approximate a civic nationalism. Recent examples of such efforts include calls to include some new phrasing into the text of the Israeli national anthem, so that Israeli Palestinians—mostly Muslims—can better identify with it, or a court ruling that in cities where there is an Arab minority, municipal authorities must signpost the streets in Arabic and Hebrew since Arabs are an indigenous or homeland population in Israel.

If the recent elections are a harbinger for the future, in the coming years these voices will be outnumbered by those who insist on an exclusively Jewish Israel—a state for the exclusive benefit of Jews. Ironically, such a view does not preclude accommodation with the Palestinians. In fact, it is important to note that Avigdor Lieberman, the Israeli politician most associated these days with Israel’s turn to the right, supports the two state solution, including territorial withdrawal from Arab neighborhoods in east Jerusalem and much of the West Bank. For this, he has drawn the ire of the religious nationalist parties, which are united against withdrawal from the biblical homeland. There is nothing new in Lieberman’s pitch for a loyalty oath or in his suggestion that Palestinians living in Israel’s northern communities be transferred to Palestine in a land-swap. Politicians from the center-

⁷ For a discussion of Hamas’ altered positions in the months before it won the 2006 elections, see Khaled Hroub, “The ‘New Hamas’ Through its New Documents,” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (Summer 2006): 6-27 and Menachem Klein, “Hamas in Power,” *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 61, No. 3 (Summer 2007): 442-459.

left Labor party have also raised such proposals. What is new is the traction that such claims now have among the Israeli voting public. In sum, the 2009 elections demonstrate that, unlike in the past, Israelis are becoming more willing impose a Jewish ethnocultural hegemony in the country, even as they have finally come to accept a Palestinian right to self-determination and the need for Israel to withdraw from most of the occupied territories.