

Israel News from David Dolan

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Shalom to all,

The Israel news report for January posted below naturally focuses on the Israeli national elections held last week, which returned Benjamin Netanyahu to power but with a weaker base than he had during his last term in office. I detail who the main winners and losers were in the electoral contest, and look at the various coalition possibilities as the Prime Minister stitches together a viable government with the support of at least half of the Knesset members. I attempted to send this report on Tuesday but most did not get it due to technical reasons, so I am sending it out again today.

The January report was completed two days before IDF warplanes saw action on the outskirts of Damascus, reportedly destroying a chemical weapons research facility and possibly killing some Russian citizens working there and also many Iranian Revolutionary Guards protecting the site. IDF missiles reportedly also hit a convoy transporting Syrian anti-aircraft rockets to Hizbullah militia forces in Lebanon. Both Iran and Syria have vowed a surprise response that will affect Tel Aviv, meaning another war may be on the horizon. Despite the tensions in the region, I am looking forward to returning to Israel next month after a time with family and friends in the United States, plus fulfilling several speaking engagements.

CLOSE NATIONAL ELECTIONS IN ISRAEL

By David Dolan

Israeli voters cast their ballots for a new Knesset in January, with the Likud party and its allies emerging just slightly ahead of centrist and left wing Jewish and Arab parties. The result was somewhat of a political upset for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu since pre-election opinion surveys had suggested that the right wing block would emerge with a clear majority in the Israeli legislature. In the end, left leaning parties captured 59 seats in the 120 member Knesset, while the right took 61 seats. However the results were also not what the leaders of the largest center-left wing party, Labor, were expecting to receive. Instead of becoming the second largest grouping in the nineteenth Knesset after the Likud (which had earlier merged with the Russian immigrant "Israel Is My Home" party), it was a new centrist party that took the second place slot, headed by a popular television talk show host whose late father headed up an earlier centrist party.

The near dead heat election outcome probably means that weeks of hard bargaining lie ahead as Netanyahu attempts to cobble together a new coalition government, which will need the support of several parties to exist. If he fails to do so, Israeli President Shimon Peres has the option of asking the leader of the second largest party to try to form a government. If those efforts then failed, Peres could either give Netanyahu another try, or call for another round of Knesset elections—something Israel does not need at this time of heightened tensions and financial strains in the turbulent region. Netanyahu said he would attempt to form as broad a coalition as possible to face the "many dangers in the region," especially the internal warfare raging in neighboring Syria and the Iranian nuclear threat.

Parliamentary elections were also held during January in neighboring Jordan, although the vote was boycotted by the increasingly powerful Muslim Brotherhood movement. Its leaders termed the election meaningless since Jordanian King Abdullah and his cronies will continue to actually rule the country, not any new Prime Minister that will be appointed by the King. This came as Jordan continued to absorb thousands of Syrians refugees fleeing the intense fighting tearing apart their Arab country. Fierce battles racked many parts of Syria during the month as Russia continued to evacuate its citizens from Damascus and elsewhere. The Russian Foreign Minister also warned Israel and its allies not to attack Iran, calling such a military operation "a very dangerous idea." This came as a new round of international talks about Iran's threatening uranium enrichment program were postponed as Iranian leaders again stated they would never halt their nuclear development program.

Fresh unity talks were held during January between the Palestinian Authority and the rival Hamas movement, which governs the Gaza Strip. Although progress was reported at the talks, the PA later denounced the Prime Minister of the large Asian Muslim country of Malaysia for visiting Hamas officials in the small Palestinian coastal zone in a "show of solidarity" with the radical Islamic movement. Meanwhile Israeli officials ordered the evacuation during the month of Palestinian protest tents that had been set up northeast of Jerusalem in the disputed area where the government intends to construct new homes for Jewish residents.

Despite the ongoing upheaval in the region, the Middle East has been receiving its largest amount of desperately needed precipitation in over two decades. Snow fell in Jerusalem and other higher places and the Sea of Galilee rose to its highest levels in many years. Flooding occurred in some parts of Israel and in neighboring countries. More precipitation is forecast for February and March.

CLOSE OUTCOME

As noted above, the final result of the Israeli national elections held on January 22 was much closer than earlier forecast. While opinion surveys had initially predicted that the Likud party, running on a joint list with former Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman's *Yisrael Beiteinu* party, would capture around up to 39-40 Knesset seats, in the end the list only captured 31 mandates. Previously the Likud party held 27 seats in the 120 member Knesset, while Lieberman's party had 15 seats, for a combined total of 42. Therefore in effect, their joint representation actually shrank by 11 seats. Despite this, Benjamin Netanyahu emerged as the leader of the largest block of seats in the Knesset, even if only just over one fourth of the overall total of representatives in the national legislature. After the last Israeli election in early 2009, the centrist Kadima party was the largest party in the Knesset, but by just one seat. However former Kadima leader Tzipi Livni had earlier broken from her party, taking six other Kadima Knesset members with her to form the new *Hatnuah* party.

Opinion polls had also wrongly forecast that the new second largest Knesset party would be Labor, which dominated the Israeli political process for nearly 30 years until the Likud party emerged victorious under the late Menachem Begin in the 1977 elections. The party is currently being led by popular former journalist and television news commentator Shelly Yacimovich, who quit her media work to join the Knesset in 2006. The female politician, who played a significant role as an activist journalist in getting former Prime Minister Ehud Barak to remove Israeli military forces from Lebanon in the year 2000, took over the party after its former leader Barak split away to form a new party that remained a partner in the previous Netanyahu coalition government. In the end, Labor won just 15 mandates instead of the 18-20 projected in the polls, making it the third largest party in the new Knesset. Born in 1960 just outside of Tel Aviv, Yacimovich had hoped to become Israel's second female Premier, joining forces with other centrist and left wing parties to knit together a viable coalition. Media reports said she was hoping it might possibly include the Sephardic religious Shas party, which has shown in the past that it is willing to join forces with Labor if it receives enough government financial largess for doing so.

The biggest surprise of the night was the much better than expected performance of the new centrist *Yesh Atid* (*There is a Future*) party headed by another well-known television personality, Yair Lapid. While expected to lead his new party to a good showing of around 14-16 seats, the party—which many saw as the natural successor to the crumbling Kadima party founded by Ariel Sharon in 2005—did much better than that, winning 19 Knesset seats and emerging as the second largest party in the new legislature. It became immediately clear that the nascent politician heading the party would probably be the kingmaker in the formation of a new coalition government, if not possibly the new Prime Minister himself. Yachimovich immediately called upon Lapid to stay out of a new Netanyahu government even as the Prime Minister reached out to him to join forces in the formation of a broad national unity government. It later emerged that Netanyahu was planning to offer the Foreign Ministry portfolio to Lapid, who is fluent in English, which is considered a vital asset for the important post. Former Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman reportedly opposed the move, saying instead that Lapid should be appointed Finance Minister since he mainly focused on domestic issues in his successful election campaign, like the need for more affordable housing.

Tzipi Livni, who also had earlier expressed her hopes of becoming Israel's second female leader after Golda Meir, was clearly disappointed when her *Hatnuah* party won only six mandates in the new Knesset, fewer than

the polls had projected. Given her long and bitter rivalry with Netanyahu, who she once served with in the Likud party, it seemed unlikely that she would take her small center-left party into a new government led by her nemesis. Doing better than expected, winning six seats, was the ultra-leftist Meretz party, which would never even consider joining forces with the detested Likud. Coming in ahead of both parties was the religious Shas party, with 11 Knesset mandates. The conservative *Ha Beit Ha Yahudi (The Jewish Home)* party, strongly backed by Jewish residents of the disputed territories and headed by venture capitalist Naftali Bennett, captured 12 seats. The wealthy businessman-turned-politician had been projected to be the new electoral star of the night instead of Lapid. However since his parents hail from California, speculation was rife that he might be offered the Foreign Ministry since like Yair Lapid, he is fluent in English.

Rounding out the new Knesset will be the United Torah Judaism party, which took seven mandates, around its usual total. The Ashkenazi Orthodox religious party is expected to easily join a new Netanyahu coalition unless leftist anti-religious parties are included. Another possible partner is what remains of the Kadima party, which barely went over the numerical threshold for entering the Knesset. The formerly large centrist party received just two seats under current leader and former Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz. Three Arab political parties will also be represented in the next Knesset, with a combined total of 11 seats. Although over 20% of Israel's eligible voters are Arab citizens, many traditionally boycott the "Zionist" elections, meaning the Arab community is always significantly underrepresented in the Israeli parliament. In every election, some Arab voters chose Jewish parties to represent them, with several of them like Labor always including Arab or Druze politicians on their Knesset candidate lists.

In summary, 12 political parties made it into the upcoming Knesset (the outgoing eighteenth Knesset ended up with an astonishing total of 17 parties seated in it after several Knesset members split with Kadima, Labor and other parties to form new groupings). Four parties with right wing and/or religious leanings made it in, with a grand total of 61 seats—just over half of the Knesset. Four center or left wing Zionist parties crossed the threshold as well, but their combined total seats are only 33. The nineteenth Knesset includes 26 women and 38 religious representatives, both setting new records in Israel. Fifty lawmakers will be serving for the first time.

COALITION POSSIBILITIES

Israeli political analysts stated that the closer than expected election outcome will make it problematic for Benjamin Netanyahu to form a viable coalition government. And even if does so, the new government will probably be more fragile than his current coalition quilt, which has had relatively few internal struggles compared to past multi-party governments. Normally the Israeli President (who by law is empowered to appoint a candidate to form a new government) gives the first crack at coalition formation to the leader of the largest party, which is obviously Netanyahu. However 61 seats will not be quite enough to form an exclusively right wing viable government, meaning the Prime Minister must recruit at least one centrist party to join his new coalition ship of state. The most obvious choice is Kadima, whose leader, Shaul Mofaz, might be rewarded with the coveted Defense Ministry portfolio once again. However this would give Netanyahu a very slim majority in the Knesset of only three seats. Plus it was Mofaz who caused the national elections to be moved forward from their scheduled date next October after he pulled his much larger party out of Netanyahu's coalition last spring. This took place just six weeks after he led his party into a short-lived "broad national unity government" with the Likud, meaning there is no love lost between him and the conservative Prime Minister.

There is another coalition possibility that was being touted in the Israeli media in the days after the final election results were announced on January 23. It consists of another broad unity government that would include Yair Lapid's new party and Labor. This would have a more solid basis of 65 seats. It would also allow the centrist parties to work with Netanyahu to pass reform legislation on several important domestic issues, especially equal community service for all, including Orthodox Jews. However since one of Lapid's main political stands during the election campaign was the drafting of all Orthodox Jews into some form of compulsory community service, it would be unlikely that any of the three religious parties would join a wide coalition which advocates such service—unless the financial payoff was right that is. Shas in particular likes to control the Interior Ministry, which oversees synagogue construction in the land and other things considered vital to Shas leaders.

In his victory speech at Likud party headquarters, Netanyahu immediately called for as many parties as possible to join a broad coalition government. Noting that Israel is facing many important challenges in the coming months, including the struggle with Iran, the strong possibility of attack from the crumbling Assad regime in Syria, and a deepening financial crisis in Israel tied to the worldwide economic slowdown, the Premier stated he wanted to have "many partners" in his government. Of course, what the well-seasoned politician would really prefer is a much stronger Likud party that would not be reliant on a plethora of smaller parties to form a workable coalition quilt. "I believe the results of the election represent an opportunity to make changes that the people of Israel want to see, and that will serve all citizens of the state," he said, adding "I plan to lead those changes and to that end, we must establish a government that is as broad as possible, and I've already started out on that task." The last comment was an apparent reference to a quick phone call he reportedly made to Yair Lapid soon after the election results were known, supposedly mainly to congratulate him for his unexpectedly strong showing.

After expressing disappointment that her Labor party did not capture as many seats as opinion surveys had projected, Shelly Yachimovich issued a public plea for Lapid to stay out of a new Netanyahu-led government. She told reporters that she had also phoned the new populist politician to "congratulate him on his remarkable achievement," she urged him to take advantage of his significant victory "to form a different coalition." Yachimovich added that if the populist politician joined a right wing government, he would be "taking part in the middle-class calamity, which will happen the day after such a Netanyahu-led government is sworn into office." The new Labor party leader added she intends to "take advantage of the political possibility opened up in the election to form a coalition of moderate, social, peace advocate and centrist forces without Benjamin Netanyahu as Prime Minister. I intend to put a great deal of effort into it." She reiterated earlier statements that if this course of action does not lead to a centrist government led by Yair Lapid or herself, her Labor party will remain in the opposition.

In his victory speech, Prime Minister Netanyahu pointed out a number of goals that his new coalition government will advocate. First and foremost is the overall security of Jewish State, which he noted is situated in the midst of a sea of hostile neighbors. In particular, he stressed that he and his coalition partners will continue to work hard to prevent the radical Shiite Muslim regime ruling Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons capability—a hint that he still has a military attack upon Iranian nuclear sites on his agenda. The Premier also pledges to buffet Israel's now struggling economy in the face of the new global financial crisis, and work for "equality in sharing burdens and lowering the cost of living, including the cost of apartments." He ended by telling the Israeli public that, "It is a great privilege but it is also a great responsibility," to lead the country. "I believe the results of the elections represent an opportunity to make changes that the people of Israel want to see, which will serve all of the citizens of the state of Israel."

TROUBLE ALL AROUND US

The Israeli media was rife with speculation of what a new Netanyahu government might do concerning several pressing issues, especially the war tearing apart neighboring Syria and the ongoing threatening nuclear development program in Iran. This came as Russia began to airlift some 30,000 of its citizens from Syria. News reports said that both Moscow and Tehran were sending fresh weapons supplies to the embattled Assad regime in an attempt to change the tide of battle toward the government's direction. Meanwhile a leading Iranian presidential contender, Ali Akbar Velayati, granted an interview to a Lebanese television station, where he said that "If the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is toppled, the line of resistance in the face of Israel will be broken." This was considered in Israel as an indication that Iranian leaders will do everything they possibly can to keep Assad in power. Israeli military forces remain on a full war footing along the tense northern border with Syria, where anti-Assad forces, including some elements of Al Qaida, have taken control of some border military outposts.

In the face of the many grave challenges that the world's only Jewish country is currently grappling with, it is good to recall that God is in overall control of His ancient holy land and chosen people: *"And they shall live on the land I gave to Jacob My servant, in which your fathers lived, and they will live on it, they and their sons, forever. And David My servant shall be their prince forever"* (Ezekiel 37:25).

DAVID DOLAN is a Jerusalem-based author and journalist who has lived and worked in Israel since 1980. His latest book is a novel titled MILLENNIUM: THE LORD REIGNS. It is available in print and electronic form on his web site, www.ddolan.com

HOLY WAR FOR THE PROMISED LAND (Broadman & Holman), his latest book, is an overview of the history of the Israel and of the bitter Arab-Israeli conflict that rages there, plus some autobiographical details about the author's experiences living in the land since 1980. It especially examines the important role that militant Islam plays in the conflict.

ISRAEL IN CRISIS: WHAT LIES AHEAD? (Baker/Revell), which examines the political and biblical prospects for a regional attack upon Israel, settlement in the disputed territories, and related topics, is also available for purchase, along with an updated edition of his popular end-time novel, THE END OF DAYS (21st Century Press).

You may order these books at a special discount price by visiting his web site at www.ddolan.com, or by phoning toll free 888-890-6938 in North America, or by e mail at: resources@yourisraelconnection.org

DOLAN'S NEW DVD, "FOR ZION'S SAKE" is now available for purchase. Click the title under "BOOKSTORE" for more details.

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