

Public Opinion and the Political Arena

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An article on domestic developments in Israel published last year in the INSS annual strategic survey noted that while 2007 was a good year for Israel, clouds appeared on the horizon towards the end of the year. These challenges, which emerged in 2008 in the areas of security, economics, political stability, and national resilience, are also on Israel's agenda in 2009.

Israel does not operate in a vacuum and is influenced in no small measure by outside forces and constraints over which it has no control. At the same time, its ability to deal with developments deriving from its surroundings is influenced first and foremost by all aspects of its internal situation. Israel is a central factor in the Arab-Israeli conflict equation, and its decisions, actions, and failures have a crucial effect on the situation in the Middle East. While Henry Kissinger's famous declaration that Israel has only a domestic policy and no foreign policy is both an exaggeration and true of most countries, internal processes play a particularly decisive role in defining Israel's approach to the challenges it faces.

The Ongoing Security Challenge

In 2008 Israel continued to deal successfully with the problem of terrorist attacks inside the country. The year saw one shooting attack in Jerusalem and there were a few bulldozer attacks that claimed lives, but overall Israel's citizens continued to benefit from the sense of calm and security that existed in 2007. In contrast, the Gaza Strip time bomb, which had

already worsened with the Hamas takeover in June 2007, exploded in late December 2008. Throughout the year it was clear that the mortar and rocket fire from the Gaza Strip on Sderot and other communities in the area had become a serious security problem. The fire did not claim many serious casualties or extensive property damage, but the ongoing exposure to shooting continued to disrupt everyday life. This had a demoralizing effect on the country at large and instilled a lack of confidence in the government establishment.

In June 2008 a ceasefire agreement was reached with Hamas that effectively suspended the firing and brought calm to the south. However, and perhaps predictably, the agreement did not last the negotiated six month period. The situation that emerged in the last month of 2008 became intolerable and on December 27, 2008, Israel launched a military operation against Hamas in Gaza – Operation Cast Lead. Thus at the start of 2009, two and a half years after the Second Lebanon War, Israel was involved in a complicated war on its southern border.

The Israeli government decided to embark on Cast Lead six weeks before the general elections to the Knesset. According to security sources, this was one of the reasons Hamas was surprised by the operation: Hamas believed that Israel would not start a military campaign – and certainly not an extensive one – prior to the elections and before a new government was established. Indeed, this opinion was held not only by Hamas. In the days leading up to Operation Cast Lead many commentators in Israel said that Israel – in practice, if not in theory – was in a sort of limbo, and that it was highly unlikely that a government in transition would take a political or security initiative of any significance in the midst of an election campaign. However, the willingness of the government and particularly of the two main parties that comprised it – Labor and Kadima, which vied for power with Likud – to take such a decision at such a time has a clear political element to it. First and foremost it indicated the ability of the Israeli leadership to take decisions even in complex circumstances. In fact there were many, particularly outside Israel, who wondered whether embarking on the campaign at such a time was connected specifically to the elections, in other words, reflecting the desire of the country's leaders to score points

ahead of the elections. This view was openly expressed by Hamas leaders and spokespeople, and by other elements hostile to Israel.

It appears that careful analysis leads to the opposite conclusion, namely, that the timing of the operation was chosen not because of, rather despite the proximity to the elections. The country's leaders knew that it was very difficult to foresee the effect of a military campaign on the elections and that its impact was far from clear. As with all military operations, the political risks entailed in such an operation were significant: its objectives were limited from the start, and were not meant to satisfy all of the public's wishes (including far reaching goals, such as defeating Hamas or bringing its control in Gaza to an end). Neither the military achievements nor the political achievements were guaranteed, and the risk of heavy losses among soldiers and civilians (whose impact on public opinion is great) always exists, as well as the risk of becoming embroiled in unforeseen problems. Add to this the critical and suspicious nature of the Israeli public, and the volatile nature of public opinion. There was of course great pressure on the government to respond to the ongoing violence, and it appears that it had no choice but to act. On the other hand, over the years Israeli governments have demonstrated that they can withstand public pressure and desist from embarking on extensive military operations. In light of this, initiating a military operation a month and a half before the elections testifies to the leadership's willingness to take political risks and make difficult decisions. This fact in itself conveys a message of deterrence.

From beginning to the end, Operation Cast Lead enjoyed massive support from the Israeli public. The Israeli public saw and still views Cast Lead as a just war, regarding both the justification for starting the war (the war was considered by all sectors of the Jewish public as "an unavoidable war"), and the way it was waged (acknowledging a proper use of force). A survey conducted the day after the campaign started showed that 81 percent of the Israeli public supported the operation, and 12 percent opposed it.¹ Based on the known opposite stances of the Jewish public compared with those of the Arab sector on Operation Cast Lead, one may assume that the vast majority of those who opposed the campaign were Israeli Arabs and that support for the operation in the Jewish public reached 90 percent. In contrast with the Second Lebanon War – in which support for the war

and for the political and military leadership eroded as the war continued – support for Cast Lead remained strong throughout and even after it ended. There was also a consensus among the Israeli public with regard to results of the operation. In a survey conducted on January 13, 2009,² five days before the ceasefire, 78 percent of the public felt that “the operation in Gaza was a success” against only 9 percent who defined it as “a failure” (13 percent replied “don’t know”). Eighty-two percent replied negatively to the question “did Israeli use excessive military force?” against 13 percent who answered in the affirmative. Presumably very few of those answering in the affirmative were Jewish respondents. In a survey conducted at the same time,³ 82 percent gave a “very good” rating and 12 percent gave a “good” rating to the military activity, 25 percent gave a “very good” rating and 35 percent gave a “good” rating to the accompanying political activity, and 86 percent said the home front defense was “very good” (58 percent) or “good” (28 percent).

The end of the operation did not meet the expectations of a large portion of the public, despite the fact that the leadership took pains (a clear lesson learned from the Second Lebanon War) not to raise undue expectations. Nonetheless, the public’s stance on the operation was far more positive than at the end of the Second Lebanon War. Then, the attitude of the public to Resolution 1701 (which brought about a ceasefire and the end of the war) was largely negative. In January 2009, however, in a survey conducted the day the ceasefire took effect,⁴ 36 percent said they supported the ceasefire; 50 percent opposed it; and 14 percent replied “don’t know.” In surveys published about a week after the ceasefire (and a few days of absolute calm), the picture was even more positive. In one survey,⁵ 48 percent of respondents said the entire Gaza Strip should have been conquered, compared with 44 percent who said it was right to stop the campaign. In another survey,⁶ 58 percent replied that “the decision by the Israeli leadership to agree to a ceasefire, and not to continue the war in Gaza, was a correct decision,” compared with only 38 percent who said “the decision was incorrect.”

However, the aftermath of Operation Cast Lead has been very different than that of the 2006 war. The Second Lebanon War ended with a ceasefire declaration on August 14, 2006; since then Hizbollah has not fired a single

bullet, not to mention missiles or katyushas. Other than two isolated shooting incidents before Operation Cast Lead and two incidents during the operation in Gaza, which were all carried out by small Palestinian organizations or organizations connected to al-Qaeda and not sanctioned by Hizbollah, there has been complete quiet in the north. Thus for nearly three years, calm has been maintained in northern Israel, the likes of which was not seen for three decades. In addition, the fact that Hizbollah did not instigate a confrontation throughout Operation Cast Lead proved to the Israeli public that Israeli deterrence vis-à-vis Hizbollah was largely restored in the wake of the Second Lebanon War. This has not been the case with regard to Operation Cast Lead. Complete calm lasted just four days after Israel declared a ceasefire, but during the first month after the ceasefire approximately 60 rockets and mortar shells were fired on Israel and a number of terrorist attacks were carried out along the border fence, one of which killed an Israeli soldier and wounded others. In the last two weeks of February 2009, close to 30 rockets, including enhanced Qassam rockets, were fired on Israel, and some managed to reach Ashkelon.

This led the Israeli public to question the achievement of the principal declared objective of the operation. In fact, over time the opposite public opinion has emerged with regard to the operation, compared with public opinion after the Second Lebanon War. The Israeli public, most of which viewed the Second Lebanon War as a failure and a missed opportunity, subsequently started viewing the results of the war more positively. Meanwhile, Operation Cast Lead, which during and immediately after the operation was considered a great success, in time has come to be seen as a missed opportunity, if not as a failure. In a survey conducted by the Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research on February 17 and 18, 2009⁷ – one month after the end of the operation – only 39 percent of the Jewish public said they were satisfied with the results of Operation Cast Lead, compared with 25 percent who were disappointed (one third of the interviewees did not have a clear opinion on the matter). A strong reflection of the public's disappointment, particularly among the public targeted by the missile fire, is the massive support in the February 2009 elections for the Knesset among the Gaza area communities and the south in general for the right

wing parties, which contrasts with voting trends in the north and center of Israel.

From March there was a sharp drop in fire from the Gaza Strip, and the question is whether ultimately there will be long term calm in the south and the situation on the border with Gaza will be similar to that in the north. A prolonged ceasefire, regardless of whether it is backed by official consent from Israel and Hamas, would provide at least a partial answer to the public's uncertainty over the extent to which Israeli deterrence has indeed been restored in the wake of Operation Cast Lead.

The Economic Challenge

The economic situation worsened significantly along with the deterioration of the security situation. In recent years Israel experienced substantial growth; so too 2007 was an excellent year in economic terms in almost all areas, and growth continued during the first half of 2008. In the first six months of 2008 the economy grew by 4.6 percent and unemployment at the end of the third quarter was 5.9 percent, the lowest in 20 years. Nevertheless, in early 2008 it was clear that Israel would likely suffer from the recession that started in the United States, although the extent of the effect was unknown. No one then foresaw the intensity of the economic crisis that would emerge towards the end of the year.

The global crisis that erupted in September-October 2008 and changed the international picture also reached Israel, although Israel is in a better situation than the US and many other countries in the Western world. The Israeli banking system proved its robustness and has succeeded in coping with the crisis, even though the future of the non-bank credit system is unknown. However, the real economic crisis has also made its presence felt in Israel. This is reflected in a sharp decline in the level of growth, and in the continuing wave of layoffs. In 2009, for the first time since 2002, there is expected to be a drop in the GDP (the GDP dropped in the first quarter by 3.6 percent) and a considerable rise in unemployment, and businesses are likely to collapse. (The economic challenge is dealt with below in the chapter "Implications of the Global Economic Crisis," by Shmuel Even and Nizan Feldman.)

The Challenge of Government Stability

One of the principal problems Israel has faced in recent years is the lack of government stability and the ramifications for actual governance of the country. The challenge increases in view of the lack of public confidence in the establishment and the governmental systems. For several years now Israel has not had a stable government. Governments have changed every three years, and the expected term of office for a government minister is two years. Paradoxically (given the upheaval of the Second Lebanon War) 2007 ostensibly suggested greater governmental stability. The government enjoyed a clear and effective majority in the Knesset, and was faced by a divided (between right and left) and ineffective opposition. The prime minister managed to survive criticism by the Winograd Commission both on the decision making process that led to the declaration of the 2006 war and the way in which the war was conducted. He displayed impressive political maneuverability. There were even those who in contrast with previous assessments expected the government and the prime minister to remain in office until the legal end of the term in November 2010. This has not happened in Israel for a generation.

The prospects changed in 2008. The first factor was the resignation in January of Minister Lieberman and the departure of his party, Yisrael Beiteinu, from the coalition. Then, just before Independence Day, the attorney general announced he would launch criminal investigations of the prime minister, who was suspected of corruption. This led to the prime minister's resignation, and about half a year later a date was set for new elections, less than three years after the previous elections.

The sharp change of direction, from the prime minister's resignation to the scheduling of new elections, largely reflected the basic problem with the system of government in Israel. Ehud Olmert resigned when criminal investigations were initiated against him (a separate question is whether prior to an indictment his resignation was in order). In established countries, when the president or prime minister is unable to continue in office for personal reasons, the acting prime minister or vice president replaces him or his party selects someone to replace him. In 2008, the Kadima party democratically selected Tzipi Livni to serve as party chairperson and replace Olmert, and as was expected, the president asked her to form a new

government and present it to the Knesset. However, Livni was unable to form a government because each of the parties in the coalition demanded to reopen coalition talks and submitted new demands. Livni was unwilling to accept the extensive demands of the Shas party (both in financial and political terms) and therefore Israel went to the polls on February 10, 2009.⁸

The failure in governance is connected to the Israeli public's severe crisis of confidence in its leaders, the establishment, and the system of government. In Israel, as in other democratic countries, there has been a grave crisis of confidence among the general public for several years. However, since the Second Lebanon War the crisis of confidence in the establishment and governmental institutions has reached significant proportions. This phenomenon was already observed several months after the war. The annual poll conducted by the Institute for National Security Studies on national security and public opinion found that in February-March 2007 only 34 percent of the representative sample of the Jewish population of Israel said they relied on the government "to take the right decision on matters of national security."⁹ The Israel Democracy Institute (IDI) charted¹⁰ a significant decline in 2008 from 2007 in trust in governmental institutions. Trust in the police dropped to 33 percent (from 41 percent in 2007); the Knesset, 29 percent (from 33 percent in 2007); the media, 37 percent (from 45 percent in 2007); and the political parties, which in 2008 was only 15 percent. However, the most dramatic decline is in relation to the Supreme Court – 49 percent in 2008, which is a drop from 61 percent in 2007 and 80 percent at the start of the decade. The only institution that remained stable in terms of public opinion is the military: 72 percent expressed trust in the IDF (compared with 74 percent in 2007), but even this indicates a significant drop compared with a level of 90 percent less than a decade ago.

The lack of trust in the political leadership is significant. In the same IDI index, 90 percent of the Israeli public said the country is riddled with corruption (60 percent: to a great extent, 30 percent: quite a lot). In a survey conducted by Mina Tzemah at the end of December 2008, three days before the extensive military operation in Gaza,¹¹ 63 percent of the country's citizens said they "did not trust Minister of Defense Barak to manage the crisis in Gaza," compared with just 31 percent who said they relied on

him. Over 50 percent of the public said that political considerations, and not professional ones, fuel the decisions and considerations of Barak and then-Secretary of Transportation Shaul Mofaz on the crisis in Gaza. The problem indicated by the survey results is not only connected to these politicians but also to the entire political system: 72 percent of the public said that political considerations, and not professional ones, were the core of the ministers' criticism of Barak over the Gaza issue. The lack of trust and confidence and the cynicism of the Israeli public at the start of 2009 comprise a serious threat to Israel's democratic robustness.

The February 2009 Elections

The problem of governability and government stability, and the fundamental deficiencies of the system of government and elections in Israel were dramatized anew with the results of the February 10, 2009 general elections, where the results were not clear cut. The election process ran without hitches and the voting percentage – despite the stormy weather – even exceeded the percentage of the previous elections. The actual voter participation was 72 percent, lower than the level of some past years, but similar to voting rates in other Western democracies.

The final election results were published by the central elections committee 45 hours after the polling booths closed. The incoming Knesset comprises 12 parties, with seven parties having five or fewer members. In contrast with the past (as during the government of Yitzhak Rabin in 1992, or during Ariel Sharon's government from 2003), there is currently no party with 40 or more seats able to form a coalition with one or two small parties. There are two medium sized parties: Kadima with 28 seats and Likud with 27. There are three smaller parties with seats in double digits: Yisrael Beiteinu with 15 seats, Labor with 13, and Shas with 11. The remaining seven are the smallest parties.

The actual results indicate first that even though the country remains divided, the right wing bloc has gained in strength. In the outgoing Knesset, the right wing-religious bloc had 50 seats compared with 63 of the center-left wing bloc. The pensioners' party, with seven seats, did not formally identify with any bloc, but was largely seen as tending towards the center-left wing bloc. According to the results of the last elections, the political

focus has moved towards the right wing-religious bloc. This shift almost certainly reflects the disappointment of the Israelis with the peace process and with the results of unilateral withdrawals, as well as frustration with the security situation in the south of the country. On the other hand, the shift to the right may also very well reflect the wish for a change given dissatisfaction with the overall performance of the outgoing government. Interestingly, the gap between the blocs is smaller than what was expected from the surveys, and it is clearly reversible. A shift of only 5 percent in the voting can change the entire picture

Second, with one exception, the parties on the right and the left and the smaller parties sustained losses: Labor lost almost a third of its power, Meretz – on the extreme left – was almost obliterated, and the right wing religious Zionist parties and ultra-Orthodox parties lost seats (the extreme right wing National Unity Party dropped from six seats to four, a drop of one third). The two big winners were the centrist parties: Likud more than doubled its presence in the Knesset, from 12 seats to 27 seats, and Kadima, the incumbent party in power, maintained its share of the Knesset.

Third, the surprise of the elections was the achievement of Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu party, which increased its representation by a third and became the third largest party. Yet while this was an important development, its significance should not be inflated, as occurred among the domestic and foreign media. Lieberman's party largely remains a sectoral party – around two thirds of its support comes from the community of immigrants from the former Soviet Union. Yisrael Beiteinu also took on a sizable share of the protest vote, a phenomenon that will not necessarily be repeated. In the final analysis, Lieberman won less than 12 percent of the votes.

There was no definitive answer as to who won the elections. Because of an advantage of a single seat, Tzipi Livni claimed victory both for Kadima and herself as the public's preferred choice for prime minister. On the other hand, Binyamin Netanyahu claimed that he won the elections, as he was favored by the right and religious bloc, which has a clear majority in the Knesset (65 seats compared with 55 of the left wing-center bloc), and that only he was capable of assembling a sustainable coalition. Ultimately, the president asked Netanyahu to form the government.

The main question for Netanyahu was what coalition to assemble – a narrow right wing based on 65 Members of Knesset (MKs) of the right wing-religious bloc or a wide national unity government, based on the four or five large parties in the Knesset (with the support of 80-90 MKs). During the election campaign Netanyahu emphasized his wish for a wide unity government and even said his big mistake in 1996 was that he did not assemble such a government. However, the need to ensure that he, and not Livni, would be entrusted by the president with the responsibility of forming a government, and his opposition to the idea of rotation of the office of prime minister, also forced him to reach various understandings with his “natural partners,” in other words, the right wing-religious parties, which limited his freedom of maneuver. Following extensive coalition negotiations a sort of middle-road result was achieved. Netanyahu established a right wing coalition based on parties of the right wing-religious bloc, excluding the extreme National Union Party with four members – which remained in the opposition – but managed to bring in the Labor party. This development was a surprise, and was met with fierce resistance by about half of the MKs in the Labor party itself. The determination of party chairman Ehud Barak to join Netanyahu’s government even brought party to the verge of a split.

On March 31, 2009 Binyamin Netanyahu presented his new government to the Knesset. The government has thirty ministers – the largest number in the history of the country. The coalition officially comprises 74 members, and in actuality 69 members (five MKs from the Labor party refused to join the government and announced they do not support the government and do not consider themselves subject to coalition discipline). The political significance of the coalition makeup is that other than Yisrael Beiteinu, no one party has the power to bring the government down. In addition, Netanyahu and Likud initiated a number of constitutional amendments designed to make it hard to topple the government or disband the Knesset. In view of these amendments the first real test of the Netanyahu government will be the 2011 budget. Overall, in the current political situation and except for unexpected political-security upheavals, the life expectancy of the Netanyahu government looks good.

It is still very difficult to assess what policy the government will actually follow in the political-security field and on all matters relating

to the Iranian, Palestinian, and Syrian issues. What can be said is that Netanyahu formed a government in which he is at the center in terms of political positions, with Likud figures and other parties to his right, and Likud figures and political parties to his left. This allows the prime minister ample room for maneuver and enables him to take far reaching political and security initiatives and measures. In view of the considerable gains of Yisrael Beiteinu in the coalition talks and in light of the various options enjoyed by the prime minister (including the remote but not impossible option of forming a national unity government with Kadima), Lieberman will presumably think twice before deciding to leave the government. The coalition structure, the fact that the vast majority of MKs from Likud were given appointments, and the high probability that the left wing opposition will support Netanyahu's political initiatives largely neutralize the impact of the more right wing and hawkish Likud MKs.

Conclusion

In an Independence Day interview, President Peres said that this year is the "crucial year." It is true that this has been said almost every year since 1967, but there is still a sense that this year will be if not a decisive year, at least a year in which important decisions are made. A new government that is supposed to serve for several years has been established in Israel with a relatively stable coalition. The expectation, both in Israel and the world, is that this government will take initiatives and spearhead moves in many fields. This expectation takes on even more importance in view of the change this year in Washington. President Obama, who seems intent on settling international disputes through dialogue, will be in office for four if not eight years.

During the coming year, the new government in Israel will have to deal with four main issues: the economic crisis; the political process with the Palestinian Authority led by Abu Mazen, including the situation in the West Bank; the security challenge in Gaza; and most of all, the Iranian issue. Israel's ability to contend with each of these issues is inextricably connected to the relationship that develops between Jerusalem and Washington. One may assume that this relationship will be heavily influenced by the positions, policies, and decisions of Prime Minister Netanyahu. Whether

the prime minister exploits his extensive room for maneuver and presents surprises in the political field, i.e., whether he acts like Menahem Begin and Ariel Sharon or like Yitzhak Shamir – only time will tell.

Notes

- 1 “Maagar Mohot,” Channel 10, December 28, 2008.
- 2 Dialog Poll, *Haaretz*, January 16, 2009.
- 3 Teleseker, *Maariv*, January 16, 2009.
- 4 “Maagar Mohot,” Channel 2, January 18, 2009.
- 5 A survey conducted by Mina Tzemah, *Yediot Ahronot*, January 23, 2009.
- 6 Teleseker, *Maariv*, January 23, 2009.
- 7 Peace Index – The Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research, February 2009.
- 8 The problem of governance in Israel does not just derive from the existence of a coalition government. The problem is deeper and is connected to Israel’s actual political structure. Israel finds it difficult to arrive at clear decisions on the primary issues on its agenda, and particularly anything related to the national debate about the future of the territories and relations with the Palestinians. The crux of the matter lies not with the nation being divided on the issue, but with the absence of a political-governmental mechanism that is capable of allowing the government to reach a decision, especially when sharp disagreements divide the public. Such situations are frequent in most democratic countries, but these countries developed a system of government or system of voting that makes it possible to settle issues and to act. In presidential regimes (such as the United States or France) a president is elected – sometimes by a split vote – for a period of four or five years, and during this time enjoys a great deal of freedom of action. In many countries with a parliamentary regime (such as Britain or Germany) there is a bi-party or tri-party reality and a method of elections that generally allows one party to have a clear majority in parliament and set up a stable government for a long period with extensive freedom to act, even when it does not enjoy a popular majority. In all these countries stable governments or administrations are formed that are capable of implementing a plan of action and a defined and clear agenda. Although in the democratic world there are countries in a similar position to Israel, countries that suffer from a lack of governmental stability where it is difficult to settle national issues, the challenges faced by Italy or Belgium or Canada bear no resemblance at all to the challenges that confront Israel.
- 9 Yehuda Ben Meir and Dafna Shaked, *The People Speak: Israeli Public Opinion on National Security 2005-2007* (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, Memorandum No. 90, May 2007).

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- 10 Asher Arian, Tamar Herman, Nir Atmor, Yael Hadar, Yuval Laval, *The Israeli Democracy Index 2008: Between State and Civilian Society* (Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute – Guttman Center, 5768 – 2008).
- 11 A survey conducted by Mina Tzemah, *Yediot Ahronot*, December 26, 2008.