

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

## Peace Process? Check the Back Burner

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SKEPTICS like to say that the real Israeli election only begins after the votes are counted, because the electoral system makes it practically impossible for any single party to gain a majority. This week's election confirms that pattern.

As expected, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu emerged as the leader of the largest party. However, the reduced plurality of his Likud Party (which merged with Avigdor Lieberman's Israel Is Our Home) will further complicate the task of assembling a majority that can satisfy the policy preferences and personal ambitions of both his partner parties and his own base.

But whatever coalition is ultimately patched together, one thing is already clear: Israelis' preoccupations have shifted and, perhaps in an unconscious echo of Barack Obama's declared priorities for America, they want their leaders to focus on "nation-building at home."

So to the question that most non-Israelis are asking — "What do the elections mean for the Israeli-Palestinian peace process?" — the answer is, "Not much."

Despite relatively impressive macroeconomic performance, Israelis have been increasingly incensed by such issues as the unequal distribution of the benefits and burdens of growth, "sweetheart" wage agreements in some sectors of the public service, overcrowded hospitals, and unaffordable housing, especially for young people.

The year 2011 witnessed the largest and most sustained social protests in recent history, and in the month before the vote, [news of an unexpectedly large budget deficit](#) concentrated attention on the prospect of spending cuts and/or tax increases. [A poll released just before the election](#) showed that for 60 percent of potential voters, socioeconomic issues were the primary concern, with security second, at 19 percent, and peace a poor third, at 16 percent.

In other words, two months after a brief little war in Gaza, the prism through which much of the outside world views Israel — the conflict with the Palestinians and its possible resolution — now barely figures on the Israeli radar screen.

Only one prominent candidate, former Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, tried to make policy vis-à-vis the Palestinians a campaign issue, and she got very little traction. By contrast, Labor Party leader Shelly Yachimovich strongly stressed economic and social issues and played down relations with the Palestinians; that drew some criticism from within her own ranks but did not hurt her at the ballot box (though it didn't help that much, either).

The reason is not that Israelis are opposed to the conventional formula for peace — “Two states for two peoples” — or even merely ambivalent. Surveys have for years shown a consistent majority of between 60 and 70 percent endorsing the principle. Instead, the explanation lies in the lack of felt urgency — certainly as compared with domestic economic and social challenges and even with the temporarily dormant Iranian nuclear threat — coupled with cumulative fatigue at the futility of all previous efforts.

As a result, the next Israeli government, regardless of its precise composition, will almost certainly not undertake any major new initiative on this issue. Its leader and most of its prospective members will in any case not be inclined in this direction, and they will not be pushed by public opinion to become more proactive.

The Israeli election will not revive the moribund peace process. The only thing that might conceivably do that is a *deus ex machina* named Barack Obama. By clearly communicating that some positive movement is necessary to sustain the vibrancy and intimacy of the U.S.-Israeli relationship, Obama can provide for Israelis the sense of urgency they do not feel.

Of course, Obama himself may no longer believe that this challenge is urgent enough to justify the diversion of time and attention from other, more pressing problems. And even if he does, his message is likely to be discounted unless he simultaneously does more to embrace Israel, as his two immediate predecessors did, and convince skeptical Israelis that he acts from an abiding concern for and true commitment to their well-being — perhaps the kind of thing that a high-profile official visit might convey.

Finally, nothing Obama does can be effective unless it fully complements an equally visible redefinition by the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, of the

purpose of the process. For while Obama may inject an element of urgency, only Abbas can dispel the sense of pointlessness — by clearly communicating that positive movement will culminate not just in Israeli concessions on territory but also in a definitive termination of the conflict, the renunciation of any further claims, and the peaceful coexistence of two states for two peoples.

If Abbas is not inclined to move in this direction, or if his own political constraints prevent him from doing so, then the Israeli election will continue to resonate inside Israel but it will quickly fade from everyone else's view.

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[http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/24/opinion/global/peace-process-in-israel-is-on-the-back-burner.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/24/opinion/global/peace-process-in-israel-is-on-the-back-burner.html?_r=0)