



Editor: **Mark A. Heller**

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THE ARAB WORLD AND THE COMING ISRAELI ELECTIONS

Bruce Maddy-Weitzman

Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies

The collapse of Israel's national unity government and the decision to go to early elections caught the Arab world by surprise. For months, Arab decision-makers and elites had been focusing almost exclusively on the gathering war clouds over Iraq. By contrast, the Palestinian-Israeli confrontation seemed to have settled into a kind of deadly routine. The lack of diplomatic movement, the Iraqi question, and a widespread feeling of powerlessness left much of the Arab world as sullen bystanders.

Reaction to Israeli political developments, while generally low-key, was pessimistic. The initial prospect of a narrow right-wing government and the appointment of Shaul Mofaz and Binyamin Netanyahu to senior Cabinet positions were universally viewed with suspicion and concern. Mofaz, the former IDF chief-of-staff, is seen as one of the chief culprits of Israel's "brutal repression" of the Palestinians during the past two years, while former Prime Minister Netanyahu's regional image is extremely negative. In the view of one analyst in the Beirut daily *al-Nahar*, Netanyahu's agenda is to "destroy efforts to reach a settlement with the Palestinians and return to the policy of peace by coercion that he tried to impose when he was prime minister in 1996, in order to undermine all accomplished agreements and to kick Ariel Sharon out of the leadership of the Likud party

and the government." To such analysts, the irony of suddenly seeing Sharon as a relative "moderate" is apparently clear.

The possible expansion of the coalition to include Avigdor Lieberman's "Yisrael Beiteinu" was seen as further evidence of an imminent turn even further to the right. The authoritative Egyptian daily *al-Ahram* predicted that the expected Israeli coalition would be "the most extremist and aggressive government in the history of the Jewish state." And a liberal member of the Kuwaiti Parliament warned in *al-Sharq al-Awsat* that the Israeli government would include "warmongers and criminals" like Netanyahu and Lieberman and advocates of the collective "transfer" of Palestinians. At the same time, some commentators optimistically argued that the Labor Party had bolted because it understood that the Sharon-led government was a sinking ship. Still, there was a broad Arab consensus that the new Israeli government posed unprecedented danger for the region, particularly since the US Administration was preoccupied with Iraq and appeared to working hand-in-glove with the Israeli Government. Writing in the London daily *al-Hayat*, Abd al-Wahab Badrakhhan declared that "everything necessary for war with Iraq is now ready in the United States and in Israel, and the Security Council will not impede their eagerness. Developments in

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Israel have aborted all international efforts including those deployed by the 'Quartet'."

The decision to go to early elections instead of creating a narrow right-wing government eased these fears somewhat. But there was also a widespread belief that the results of the elections were unlikely to ameliorate the situation. The domestic Israeli political scene receives considerable coverage in the Arab media, and the possibility of a Labor-led government is deemed remote. It is also understood that Israel will be consumed by domestic politics in the coming months – a fact which could, in certain circumstances, lead to a worsening of Israeli-Palestinian relations, as Israeli leaders vie for the mantle of "tough guy." Hence, the combination of concern and passivity, coupled with the understanding that the way in which the Iraqi "file" is addressed will have as much, or more to do with the future parameters of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as will domestic Israeli politics.

The one Arab government that has taken a more active approach towards the Israeli domestic arena and towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in general is Egypt. Cairo has a lot on its diplomatic plate these days. Conscious of the importance of its relationship with the US and equally concerned with asserting its role as *primus inter pares* in the Arab world, it has moved to fashion a broad Arab consensus in support of an approach to the Iraqi question based on international legitimacy. The UN Security Council resolution which emerged on Iraq was satisfactory to Cairo (and to Syria, which made the Council vote unanimous), and Egypt moved swiftly to mobilize the Arab League behind it and persuade the Iraqis to accept it.

The political uncertainty in Israel added to Egypt's concerns about the possible implications of the approaching showdown in Iraq. Worst-case scenarios linking the Iraqi and Israeli-Palestinian spheres, however unlikely, are not difficult to sketch. Cairo has therefore taken a

number of small steps in recent days to limit the potential for instability. Husni Mubarak's recorded speech to the public gathering in Tel Aviv marking the anniversary of Yitzhak Rabin's assassination, broadcast in full on Israeli television (and Egyptian television as well), was his most direct approach ever to Israeli public opinion. His praise for Rabin's courage, his call on the Israeli peace camp not to let his legacy die, his comparison of Rabin to the late Anwar al-Sadat, his vigorous condemnation of the Sharon government, and his reassurance that Egypt's pursuit of peace was an unchanging strategic choice all reflected his understanding that the two years of Israeli-Palestinian violence had had a profoundly negative impact on the Israeli public's faith in the Arab side's willingness to make peace. *Al-Ahram* reflected the government's view that the coming Israeli elections did matter and that the outcome was not a foregone conclusion. Rather, the elections would be influenced by many factors, including continuing Palestinian "*fedayeen* operations." Up until now, the paper noted, these had only produced harder-line Israeli positions and greater right-wing extremism. Moreover, the paper continued, it was incumbent upon the Palestinian leadership to reach out to the left-of-center camp in Israel, in order to place their cause in the center of the political debate. Only in this way could the Likud's expected electoral gains be checked and the peace process revived.

Egypt understands that Palestinian actions are likely to affect both the course of the Israeli elections and the pace and depth of the "Quartet's" future engagement in the Palestinian-Israeli sphere. This is highlighted by Egyptian-sponsored efforts to broker a Fatah-Hamas understanding which would effectively halt Palestinian suicide bombings and lower the overall level of violence. Whether or not these efforts bear fruit remains to be seen.