

AN ELECTION IN THE SHADOW OF WAR

Gil Troy

Israel's elections on February 10 were held in the shadow of the conflict with Hamas in Gaza. The electoral results were a virtual tie in the Knesset between Tzipi Livni's moderate Kadima party, and Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud on the right and the ultra-nationalist party of Avigdor Lieberman, which finished third and may hold the balance of power in a new coalition. From Jerusalem, Gil Troy assesses the political and security issues from an engaged Israeli perspective.

Tenues dans l'ombre du conflit de Gaza avec le Hamas, les élections israéliennes du 10 février n'ont pu départager un vainqueur entre le Kadima, parti modéré de Tzipi Livni, le Likoud, parti de droite de Benjamin Nétanyahou, et le parti ultranationaliste d'Avigdor Lieberman, qui se retrouve troisième mais pourrait détenir la balance du pouvoir dans une nouvelle coalition. Depuis Jérusalem, Gil Troy analyse du point de vue israélien les enjeux de politique et de sécurité actuels.



Israel's elections, held on February 10, reflected that little country's charming yet exasperating complexity. The campaign included government-mandated television broadcasts of political commercials in one hourly package. All 33 parties on the ballot peddled their wares nightly, from the incumbent Kadima party running without mentioning its disgraced incumbent prime minister, Ehud Olmert, to the marginal party linking Holocaust survivors with activists trying to legalize marijuana — more Seinfeld parody than serious movement.

The dizzying range of issues, obsessions, tactics and temperaments would be delightful, if the threats from Iran, Hamas and others were not so terrifying. Finally, on election night, after an impressive voter turnout of 65 percent, the results proved baffling. Posing a democratic conundrum that would vex political philosophers, Tzipi Livni's centrist Kadima party won 28 seats — not enough for a ruling majority in the 120-person Knesset, Israel's parliament — while Benjamin Netanyahu's conservative Likud party ended up with 27 seats but the most ideological allies in the Knesset. As if in a scene out of a Zionist novel, the country's wise, weathered president, Shimon Peres, one of the last living links to the old-new country's founders, had to decide which party leader was most likely to form a coalition and become prime minister.

Every Israeli election is exceptional. Israel's hostile neighbours and the broad range of participation from Zionist Jews to anti-Zionist but religious Jews to anti-Zionist but freely voting Arabs, as well as the anomaly of a liberal democracy thriving amid the Middle East's many autocrac-

ies, make every election practically miraculous. Still, this election felt particularly portentous, barely six weeks after the war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza began.

The Gaza fighting's toll on both Israelis and Palestinians was tragic. Israeli newspapers reported ghastly stories, from the Beersheba boy struck by shrapnel as his mother tried shielding him to the Gaza obstetrician who lost three daughters to an errant missile. But most heartbreaking was that this war was preventable. Israel spent eight years and sustained over 10,000 rocket hits hoping to avoid invading Gaza. Hamas's decision to impose this war on Israel — and the Palestinian people — reflects the self-destructive character of Palestinian nationalism, which may rank as one of history's most self-defeating nationalist movements.

By ending the six-month ceasefire with repeated rocket bombardments, Hamas forced Israel's hand. Hamas's timing was terrible — for Hamas. Barack Obama was about to become president of the United States. Obama did not want a Gaza war crowding his already full agenda. President George W. Bush recognized Israel's right and responsibility to self-defence — and blamed Hamas for the war. Even all the hand-wringing about a "disproportionate response" implicitly justified at least some Israeli reaction to the Hamas rocket barrage against Israeli civilians.

Still, credit Hamas with honesty. The organization maintained its mission of seeking Israel's destruction. Herein lies the Palestinian movement's great failure. The

Israeli statesman Abba Eban said the Palestinians never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity. The tragedy of Palestinian nationalism is that the Palestinians appear more invested in negating than creating, missing opportunities to build their own state because they seek their big chance to destroy the Jewish state.

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Palestinians have imprinted into their history the pattern of provocation building toward devastation that Hamas just replicated. In 2005, Israel withdrew from Gaza. The Israeli settlers who were forcibly removed by their own government showed how Gaza's sand and sun could produce winter crops fetching great prices in Europe. American Jewish philanthropists donated \$14 million to buy the settlers' hothouses and help Gazans create a viable economy. Instead — and this was a year and a half before Hamas seized power — the Palestinians chose wallowing and bloodletting over state-building. They destroyed the hothouses, intensified the rocket fire from Gaza to southern Israel and did nothing to improve their own quality of life.

One moving Jewish prayer says, "Because of our sins, we were exiled from our land." This prayer taught Jews to be self-critical and take responsibility for their destiny. After the Holocaust, Jews could have lashed out violently, or wallowed as the world's most victimized people. Instead, prodded by Zionist pragmatists, they compromised and built. Jews embraced the ethos of Zionist pioneers who sang, "We have come to the land to build and be rebuilt." They understood that, as Israel's first president Chaim Weizmann' taught, "no state is handed to a people on a silver platter."

Until Palestinians also collectively take responsibility for their own sins and miscalculations, they will not be redeemed. They — and their supporters — should learn from Zionism rather than demonizing it, understanding that nation-building requires constructive solutions, not threats of destruction; compromises with reality,

not repeated calls for blood; a culture building a better life, not a cult romanticizing death.

Tragically, the Palestinians' enablers in the Arab world and the West encourage their worst instincts. Iran funds the most extreme Palestinians, including Hamas, along with its jihadist proxies in Lebanon, Hezbollah.

After the war with Hezbollah ended in 2006, one former tank commander sighed, "When my kids were teenagers and stumbled, I reassured them that, fortunately, the lessons learned outweighed the damage done: so too with Israel's army." This winter Israel fulfilled this prophecy. Great democracies like Israel can transform citizens' grumblings into constructive self-criticism, turning officials' failures into redemptive improvements.

While applying many lessons learned, this war illustrated the Lebanon war's success. Hezbollah's inaction as Israel pummelled another Iranian proxy, Hamas, suggests that Israel restored deterrence. Meanwhile, the civilian Winograd Commission and numerous internal Israeli army reviews proposed clever solutions to the logistical problems that plagued the battlefield and the home front.

This time, with Hamas's Grad missiles reaching major cities including Ashkelon and Beersheva, "the entire

country is the front line," one radio announcer proclaimed. Still, the municipal and national governments responded quickly to emergencies, keeping citizens informed and calm. In 2006, individual citizens and flamboyant tycoons compensated for bureaucratic incompetence, hosting refugees from the Hezbollah bombardment; in 2009, municipal bureaucrats were the heroes.

More surprising, Israel's governing trinity — Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Defence Minister Ehud Barak and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni — avoided the Lebanon war's bragging and mission creep. They kept Israel's goals modest, hoping to end Hamas's bombardment from the air and arms smuggling via underground tunnels. This self-discipline reverberated down the chain of command. Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi was the war's Greta Garbo, often seen, rarely heard. And this time, officers collected soldiers' cellphones before they were deployed "in country" to thwart electronic eavesdropping or loose lips.

Israel's military learned to be as nimble as the terrorists. In 2006 Hezbollah ambushed regularly scheduled supply convoys lumbering along the three border crossings into Lebanon. This time, units entered and exited Gaza via multiple routes at random times, frequently picked out of a hat, so no one knew the next move.

Considering Gaza's density, Hamas's propensity for cowering behind civilians and the firepower Israel learned it needed to protect soldiers in urban combat, the number of civilian deaths was surprisingly low. Every innocent death is tragic. Still, as one young tank commander said, "I saw an old woman hunched over with a suicide belt wrapped around her, walking into a building where our guys were stationed. What can you do...."

While all war is hell, wars also bring out a soft side in Israel's body politic. The radio plays sappy songs,

about — as one hit goes — the desire to embrace every soldier, from the chief of staff to the rawest recruit. Talk shows broadcast heartbreaking letters from teary mothers and fathers to their fighting “Dudus” and “Mickey.” National icons like Haim

the maternity ward for a safer area. The pictures of Jewish, Bedouin, Druze and Muslim Israelis dressed in pyjamas, some rolling their newborns in carts, others dragging IV monitors, illustrated just who Hamas targets — as did the hospital’s need to put sand-

protect its own citizens while trying to minimize the enemy’s civilian casualties.

Nevertheless, Israel’s military response to Hamas’s rockets, entirely justified by the provocation, triggered debate worldwide. Some criticism was reasonable, anguished, sympathizing with a state’s right to self-defence, while questioning the response’s intensity. Alas, much criticism

was disproportionate, dishonest and frequently discriminatory. Shouting at Jews “Go back to your ovens” in Fort Lauderdale, smashing Starbucks Coffee windows in London, calling Israelis “Nazis” in Toronto lacks any ambiguity. It is shocking how quickly condemnation of Israeli actions degenerates into anti-Zionism, which is often thinly disguised anti-Semitism.

Generalizing about Zionism’s essence condemns Jewish nationalism with the traditional anti-Semitic tactic of leaping from criticizing individual Jewish actions to generalizing about Jews and Judaism. The inverted rhetoric follows its inexorable logic: accusing the victims of the 20th century’s most horrific genocide of committing genocide, then essentializing

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Avraham, whose son Benny was kidnapped, then killed by Hezbollah in 2000, visit the troops, hugging them and delivering supplies of candy bars, long johns and, mercifully, clean underwear.

In one gruelling, inspiring day, Haim Avraham and I visited areas closed to the press during the war, implementing another lesson from Lebanon. We visited an air force base, a tent city of reserve paratroopers, a tank squadron, an engineering corps unit, crack Givati troops and a naval base. The soldiers’ calm, mature, professional and high-spirited demeanour impressed us. This was a war not of anger and chaos, but of necessity and discipline. The soldiers evoked the traditional Israeli formula: “*Ein breira*,” we have no choice. They hoped that this time, they could finish the job. No one rejoiced in the civilian casualties — and many spoke of trying to minimize civilians’ suffering. The soldiers noticed, of course, that Israel always targeted terrorists, and occasionally missed. Hamas always targeted civilians and occasionally hit soldiers.

At Beersheba’s Soroka Hospital, the home front and the battlefield met. Despite occasional “*Tzeva adom*,” “red alert” sirens giving a 60-second warning of incoming Grads, the staffers worked resolutely, calmly, heroically. Many still could not forget the heartbreaking new mothers’ shuffle, when the bombing began, leaving

bags over its sleep lab. Just outside the hospital, by its helipads, a line of stretchers stood, waiting to be filled with the day’s casualties, the whiteness of the sheets soon to be stained by the blood of young kids who would rather surf the Net than fight a tragic but justified war.

At one briefing for visiting North Americans, a rabbi asked: “Do the Palestinian casualties from Gaza arrive here, too?” The administrator answered, “No longer. This is now for soldiers and for locals. Gazans go to other Israeli hospitals.” Here was Israel’s democratic dilemma, in all its messy grandeur. A democracy that sustains 10,000 rocket hits — especially after withdrawing from an area whose people could have pursued peace — must defend itself. But

While Israel has not endured as many elections as Canada in the last four years, this election was the fifth in 10 years. The muddled results, with a centrist victor but a right-leaning Knesset, made many Israelis fear another election soon. Moreover, many candidates from right to left demanded electoral reforms to strengthen mainstream parties and minimize marginal parties’ fragmenting power.

both the rabbi and the doctor assumed — correctly — that Israel would nevertheless act as morally as possible in hellish circumstances. Most days, Israel stopped attacking at midday to distribute humanitarian supplies. And here, too, was the secret to Israel’s success. Along with the democratic capacity to improve, it has the democratic conscience to

and demonizing Zionism, their movement for collective national fulfillment, leads to calls for eradication. (It also excuses Iranian calls for Israel’s genocide.) Jews have seen this happen too often to be blasé about it, whether the speaker is a Vatican official or a street punk.

Essentialism poisons the environment and corrupts other arenas. In

the last 40 years, every major military action by a Western power received massive criticism. However, when opinion goes against Israel this singularly questions Israel's existence, not just its actions. More than 60 years after Israel's founding, the world still

the more they suffered from those risks, the greater was the world's disapproval. Of course, Israel is not blameless. But whatever missteps Israel made pale in comparison to the three tragic truisms now dominating Israeli political consciousness: Oslo's

who recently returned to Netanyahu's Likud, as once saying, "People wouldn't buy a used car" from Netanyahu. Kadima quoted Netanyahu's father endorsing his son for foreign minister but not prime minister. And Kadima quoted Bill Clinton saying, "I can't trust him."

Amid the frenetic bargaining shaping the new coalition, world opinion should note the subtleties amid the crudity. No matter who leads, Israel will still seek a true peace. Israel's critics will always concentrate on the cards that Israel's holds and scrutinize Israel's actions. Yet Palestinians will remain far more in control of their destiny than their enablers throughout the world admit.

has the Jewish state on probation, seemingly accepted only when it behaves well.

The Hamas threat, the Iranian rush to go nuclear and the world's one-sided attacks on Israel haunted Israel's election. It may be a remnant of millennia of depending on the kindness of strangers, or a reflection of living in a small, embattled democracy surrounded by genocidal autocrats and terrorists, but Israelis are sensitive to world opinion. True, talking about "the world's" attitude vastly oversimplifies. But the short-hand works, considering how monolithic the criticism of Israel seems to be.

Israel's rightward shift on election day resulted from the failure of the left's ideas at home — and the betrayal by liberals worldwide. Israelis turned rightward because the failure of territorial concessions has been compounded by a broken covenant with the world. For decades liberal critics at home and abroad insisted that if Israel withdrew from the territories it conquered in 1967, Palestinians — and the rest of the Arab world — would make peace. The second, related assumption was an implicit compact that the world's friendship would compensate for whatever security risks Israel took.

Tragically, many Israelis feel that the more they risked for peace, and

concessions resulted in terrorists murdering over one thousand Israelis; disengaging from Gaza brought thousands of missiles raining on southern Israel; and both times, when Israel finally defended itself after extended provocations, the worldwide chorus of denunciation fuelled anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism.

Thus, amid the usual democratic hoopla, much campaign messaging was sobering. Defence Minister Ehud Barak of the Labour party emphasized

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that Hamas sustained a heavy blow and Israel enjoyed restored deterrence, thanks to his Gaza operation, but warned: "The nuclear centrifuges continue to spin in Iran, Hamas continues to rearm, and Syria threatens too." Likud's borderline sexist campaign accused Kadima's leader, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, of being weak on defence. The Likud campaign insisted, "*Zeh gadol aleha*," the job is too big for her. Kadima responded by treating Benjamin Netanyahu as Israel's Richard Nixon. Commercials quoted Menachem Begin's son, Benny Begin,

Of course, the new US president, Barack Obama, almost overshadowed the race. Livni surmounted Netanyahu's lead by warning of a potentially dysfunctional dynamic between Netanyahu and Obama — each of whom

always considers himself the smartest man in the room. Livni also tried channelling some Obama optimism, although a religious party first translated "Yes we can" into Hebrew.

The campaign of Yisrael Beiteinu, (Israel Our Homeland), was even harsher. The burly Russian immigrant — and former Netanyahu chief of staff — Avigdor Lieberman campaigned against Israel's Arab citizens, who have been spectacularly ill served by leaders more radical than they are. Lieberman cleverly targeted Azmi Bishara, who

collaborated with Hezbollah and Hamas while serving in the Knesset. Bishara is on the lam fearing arrest in Israel — yet still collecting a lucrative Knesset pension. Lieberman's party ended up as the third most powerful in the Knesset, and as the story of the election.

Against this backdrop, it is remarkable that so many Israelis remain willing to risk for peace, that so many former rightists like Tzipi Livni and the outgoing prime minister, Ehud Olmert, now champion the two-state solution. Even Avigdor Lieberman

accepts territorial compromise. This willingness reflects how ingrained the culture of peace is among Israelis, and how strong is liberal nationalists' redemptive power. For all the talk about Israel's "rightward shift," Kadima, Livni's centrist party, won the most votes. The Knesset's estimated right-left breakdown of 65 to 55 seats remains quite balanced. Most important, Israel remains the Middle East's only liberal country, judging by the usual standards of egalitarianism, democracy, social justice and sensitivity to women, homosexuals and racial diversity.

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holds and scrutinize Israel's actions. Yet Palestinians will remain far more in control of their destiny than their enablers throughout the world admit. If Palestinians want a state — and want peace with Israel — they need to cultivate a political culture of nation-building, not martyrdom. And if leftists in Israel and worldwide want progress in the Middle East, they must demand Palestinian reforms while restoring the world's broken covenant with Israel citizens.

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reforms to strengthen mainstream parties and minimize marginal parties' fragmenting power. This conversation — along with the campaign's nastiness — revealed the dissatisfaction with the system and the leaders it produced. Yet, despite the frustration, Israel retained its membership in that small, charmed circle of democratic countries that change government peacefully and with the people's consent, despite the inevitable grumblings and missteps.

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