



## **Kadima's Victory and U.S. Policy on the Arab-Israeli Conflict**

**Ariel Cohen**

**Colaboraciones n° 884**

**April 6, 2006**

Ehud Olmert's Kadima (Forward) party won less than one-quarter of the available Knesset seats (29 out of 120) in the Israeli parliamentary elections held March 28. A plurality of voters seems to favor unilateral withdrawal from Judea and Samaria (the West Bank) and left-leaning economic policies. Some allege that the ideology of the Land of Israel—which includes claims on Judea and Samaria, the historic birthplace of the nation of Israel—has been abandoned.

But the lack of a Palestinian partner in peace bodes ill for the security and prosperity of the Jewish state. The Hamas-controlled Palestinian Authority calls for the destruction of Israel and is likely to start a new terrorist war. The U.S. must recognize this and prepare for the rough road ahead.

### **A Political Earthquake**

Israel has a history of massive political shifts and successful new centrist parties (Yahad in 1977, Shinui in 2003). The polls predicted a massive victory for Kadima, Ariel Sharon's brainchild party. For the first time, a new party was supposed to become the dominant force in the center, pushing aside Labor and Likud—and it almost happened.

The elections, with the lowest turnout rate in Israeli history (63 percent) and some seats likely to be contested, brought several surprises that the pollsters had failed to predict:

- The collapse of the Likud, headed by former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The party won only 12 seats. Netanyahu, unpopular after his 1996-1999 stint as prime minister and having sought

deep cuts in the social safety net under Sharon, led his party to its greatest defeat since Sharon and Menachem Begin founded it in 1975. Several Likud leaders abandoned the party for Kadima, including Olmert, former defense minister Shaul Mofaz, and Foreign Minister Tsipi Livni.

- The Our Home Israel party, which represents Russian-speaking immigrants and is led by Moldovan-born Avigdor Lieberman, has now become the second largest party on the right, with 11 seats.
- The Labor Party, led by Moroccan-born former trade union chief Amir Peretz, did surprisingly well, coming in second with 19 seats. Peretz, a populist super-dove who advocates socialist tax-and-spend policies but lacks higher education, foreign policy and security credentials, is deeply mistrusted by Israeli elites.
- The Pensioners' Party, led by former Israeli Mossad veteran Rafi Eitan, did surprisingly well, winning 7 seats and drawing support from the young café crowd in Tel-Aviv in what Israeli analysts describe as a post-modern vote.

### **Forward to Retreat**

Kadima ran on a platform of unilateral Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank, with no reciprocal political agreements, such as a peace treaty or even a long-term ceasefire from the Palestinians. The proposed retreat,

which would require relocating up to 80,000 Jewish residents, will further split Israeli society and may result in violent resistance.

After the elections, Olmert will need to forge a coalition with Labor to implement his policies. Peretz is likely to demand a massive social spending package that will reverse Netanyahu's budget cuts and send Israel back to the dark days of 2003, when the economy faltered in the wake of repeated terrorist attacks. Smaller parties, such as Sephardi Orthodox Shas, may join the coalition in exchange for cash for their social programs. Parties that are hawkish on security, no matter their domestic politics, may be unwilling to join the new government. As a result, Olmert's coalition could be narrow and divisive.

### **No Peace Option**

Olmert announced that he will seek a Palestinian partner for peace talks. But Hamas refuses to recognize Israel, calls for its destruction, and will not denounce terror. Hamas is an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, a radical and often violent organization that seeks to establish a Sharia state throughout the Middle East and beyond. It is supported by Iran and Saudi Arabia and claims that all the Holy Land is the land of the Islamic religious endowment (*Waqf*). Hamas has already allowed al-Qaeda and Hizballah to provide terrorist training and begin recruitment in Gaza.

Under the circumstances, a unilateral withdrawal is likely to invite more violence. Despite Israel's withdrawal from Gaza, Qassam and Katyusha rockets are fired on Israeli towns and cities daily and threaten one of the

country's key power stations. If Israel pulls out from the West Bank, Hamas will control the strategic mountain ranges that dominate the coastal planes of Israel. Missiles fired from the West Bank could threaten Israel's densely populated central plane and its Ben Gurion International Airport. And Hamas, responsible for dozens of attacks that killed and wounded hundreds of Israelis, may return to those tactics as it establishes political control.

### **Recommendations for the Bush Administration**

U.S. strategic priorities in the Middle East are at stake, as well as U.S. credibility. The U.S. must show itself willing to stand against terrorist organizations, even those that win elections, when they threaten tolerance, civil society, and the rule of law. U.S. interests would also suffer if Israel becomes a security burden or is overwhelmed by terror. The Bush Administration and the State Department should take two major steps:

- **Lead** a worldwide campaign to isolate Hamas—not just among Western allies, but including the United Nations, Russia, China, the Arab and Muslim world. This campaign should include cessation of all economic assistance to the Pal-

estinian Authority, as hundreds of millions of assistance dollars in the past were misallocated and ended up in offshore bank accounts controlled by Yassir Arafat, his cronies, and members of his family. As well, such assistance is fungible, and Hamas is likely to divert foreign support to terrorist uses, such as buying weapons and paying suicide bombers' families.

- **Demand** that Hamas not only recognize Israel, abandon violence, and adhere to the "road map"—including dismantling its heavily armed militias—but also end its systematic brainwashing of the Palestinian population, including children, to become homicide bombers in the guise of "holy warriors" (*moujahideen*).

### **Conclusion**

Israeli voters have demonstrated once again that they are willing to support far-reaching compromise for peace. Until such time as Palestinians produce a realistic leadership willing to compromise and negotiate, the U.S. should be clear that Israel has the right to protect itself against terror threats by all means necessary—just as the U.S. does.

*Ariel Cohen, Ph.D., is Senior Research Fellow in Russian and Eurasian Studies and International Energy Security at the Douglas and Sara Allison Center of the Davis Institute for International Studies at The Heritage Foundation. Conway Irwin assisted in the preparation of this paper.*