

## Blog Post: Israeli & Palestinian Elections and the Peace Process

What are you supposed to do while waiting for BOTH shoes to drop? The Israeli elections are just one week away, and the Israeli electorate is ever capable of surprises. Yet the results here look reasonably certain – a Kadima-led government with Labor as its principal partner, meaning with Likud as the official opposition. But both devil and angel are here in the details. The balance of ministerial appointments, as also the importance of the ministries assigned to the coalition partners, will depend critically on the precise parliamentary strength of the participating parties.

At the same time, we await the dropping of the other shoe: Hamas and its relationship to the PA, to the PLO, to its charter, to its empowerment.

One can easily become seduced by and then trapped into this waiting game. But the emerging truth is that the game is a sideshow. What is happening and what is contemplated by the actors goes well beyond tactical shifts here and there, even farther beyond the allocation of ministries and such. What now emerges is the beginning of a fundamental and frightening shift in circumstance that will change the discourse and the options themselves.

Let's begin with a recognition that Hamas, for all its Palestinian-nationalist fervor, also sees itself as part of – indeed, now the vanguard part of – the international Moslem Brotherhood. The wave of rising Islamism is a new and troubling fact of Middle Eastern Arab life, and there is no telling where it will end. In the narrower arena of the Israel-Palestine conflict, both Hamas nationalism and its relation to the Moslem Brotherhood strongly suggest that there is no possibility for a fundamental agreement between Israel and a Hamas-led PA. A de facto truce, for a time, perhaps – but nothing more than that, surely nothing that would meet the conditions laid down by Israel and more or less accepted by the international community.

If that were all, one might be inclined to hope for a truce that would last for four years, until the next Palestinian elections, and then hope that Hamas's failure to establish itself as a legitimate actor in the international community would lead to its electoral defeat. But that is in reality more fantasy than plausible hope. A fiscally embattled Hamas-led Palestinian Authority would almost surely mean an embittered Palestinian people.

More important, Israel will not be standing still for four years, waiting for a Hamas defeat at the polls. That would not only be irresponsible; it would be contrary to what the presumptive winner of the Israeli elections has promised.

Ehud Olmert's new word for what he has in mind is "hitkansut," a word (the same root as "knesset," as in "bet kneset" – "synagogue" or, literally, "house of assembly," that means "ingathering," "consolidation." That's Olmert's descriptive for his plan to close down the isolated Jewish settlements in the West Bank, to find new housing for the settlers in Israel proper or in the settlement blocs that Israel plans to retain. And Olmert

has promised as well that if and as negotiations with Hamas prove impossible – as they almost surely will – Israel will unilaterally set the borders of the Jewish state.

There's the abrasive rub. Those borders, as now contemplated, render a viable Palestinian state impossible. If the current plan is executed, a two-state solution is no longer an option. Period.

The principal reason for that is Israel's plan – already endorsed by Olmert – to develop a parcel of land known as E1, the corridor between the eastern boundary of Jerusalem and the largest West Bank settlement of all, Ma'aleh Adumim, with a population of more than 30,000 people. The United States long ago objected to Israel's development of E1, but now, apparently in the belief that the victory of Hamas gives Israel more room for unilateral action, Olmert has explicitly endorsed it.

If you look at a topographic map of the land, you will see the consequence. Build up E1 with housing and hotels, as now planned, and you effectively create a barrier between the southern West Bank and the northern West Bank. So you end up with three pockets of Palestinian territory, the two no longer connected pockets of the West Bank and, a short distance away but locked into its own space, the Gaza Strip. And that is not a country, not a state.

It is no help to say that the Palestinians have brought this impossible situation on themselves. Whether or not that is so, however one allocates the historic responsibility for the current and the prospective situation, the hard core truth that remains is: the Palestinian people. They are not going away. They would not go away even if they had some place to go to. They live where they live, and they will continue to live there. Sooner or later – it now appears likely to be later, much later – Israel will have to figure out a way to live with them.

The current Israeli doctrine is based on figuring out and then implementing a way to live without the Palestinians – that is, as separated from them as possible. Hence the wall/fence, hence “consolidation.” That seems just now to be the real consensus in Israel. And one can respect the Israeli desire to have done with the matter, to breathe easy at last.

But for better or for worse, Israel cannot “have done” with the Palestinians. There they are, just on the other side of the fence, of the border. Consign them to bantustans, and you may be confident that their principal product will be resentment. In time, that product will be packaged for export. You may catch a breather for a year or two, but the longer you wait, the greater the explosion that will inevitably interrupt your recess.

Conclusion? Israel cannot afford a recess, and someone must tell that to the Israeli people. Conclusion? Israel cannot draw its borders in a way that will render a two-state solution impossible.

E1 is the heart of the current matter. Its development, and the likely consequent incorporation of Ma'aleh Adumim into the municipal boundaries of Jerusalem, would cut

the West Bank in two and would also create a barrier between the Arab population of East Jerusalem and the rest of the West Bank.

These chickens will come home to roost before long, and the disease they carry is every bit as deadly as avian flu.