



ISRAEL MATTERS!

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Israeli Election Produces No Clear Winner

U.S. Vows to Work With New Israeli Government

President Barack Obama intends to work toward Middle East peace regardless of who forms Israel's new government, the White House said following the Israeli elections. "President Obama looks forward to working with whoever makes up that next Israeli government in a search for lasting and durable peace in the region," White House spokesman Robert Gibbs said. The statement was issued as election results failed to produce a clear winner.

Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni of the Kadima party and Likud's Benjamin Netanyahu had both declared victory, with 99 per cent of the ballot counted. "We have been working over the years with governments in Israel trying to affect the peace process. And that's still going to be our goal," State Department deputy spokesman Robert Wood said.

Wood said the U.S. would wait until a new government is formed before commenting on options for moving forward on the peace process, but said Washington remains hopeful that a new government will embrace a two-state solution to the conflict with the Palestinians. "We certainly hope that a new government will continue to pursue a path to peace," he said.

Both Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni's Kadima party and Benjamin Netanyahu's opposition Likud styled themselves the winners of Israel's elections, after it became apparent that Kadima had won the most seats in the new Knesset, but the Likud-led right-wing would constitute the larger bloc.



Kadima narrowly led Likud with a predicted 28 seats, while the latter had garnered a predicted 27 seats.

The inconclusive election results sent Israel into political limbo. The Israel Beiteinu party, the third-place finisher, could be critical to the nature of the next coalition. Party leader Avigdor Lieberman indicated it was his intention to go with the Likud. Lieberman told cheering supporters, "It's true that Tzipi Livni won a surprise victory. But what is more important is that the right-wing camp won a clear majority... We want a right-wing government. That's our wish and we don't hide it."

The results set the stage for what could be weeks of coalition negotiations. The first such meetings had begun with Netanyahu meeting the head of the ultra-Orthodox Shas faction and Livni meeting Avigdor Lieberman.

Two of the more likely options could see a hard-line government led by Netanyahu, leaving Livni in the opposition, or some form of accommodation between the two in the form of a centrist coalition in which they would share power. Whatever government is forged, it is unlikely to move quickly toward peace talks with the Palestinians. As a result it could find itself on a collision course with President Barack Obama, who has said he's making a Mideast peace deal a priority.

Netanyahu has derided the past year of peace talks under Kadima as a waste of time, and said he wants to focus on reviving the Palestinian economy and crushing Hamas to remove it from power. During Netanyahu's three-year term as prime minister a decade ago, he largely froze the interim peace deals his predecessors negotiated with the Palestinians. Livni has said she would continue peace talks with moderate Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who governs the West Bank. But she also advocates a tough line against Hamas and was one of the architects of Israel's three-week Gaza war.

Editor's Note - Due to the lead time required for submission of *Israel Matters!* for the TBS Bulletin, the changing circumstances relating to the Israeli elections might have unavoidably altered the information reported in this issue by the time it goes to press.

UN: Backtracks on Claim that Deadly IDF Strike Hit Gaza School; Will Probe Hamas Use of Children as Human Shields

The United Nations has reversed its stance on one of the most contentious and bloody incidents of the recent Israel Defense Forces operation in Gaza, saying that an IDF mortar strike that killed 43 people on January 6 did not hit one of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency schools after all. The UN had been under pressure to put the record straight after doubts arose that the school had actually been targeted. Maxwell Gaylord, the UN humanitarian coordinator in Jerusalem, announced that the IDF mortar shells fell in the street near the compound, and not on the compound itself. Gaylord said that the UN "would like to clarify that the shelling and all of the fatalities took place outside and not inside the school."

UNRWA, an agency whose sole purpose is to work with Palestinian refugees, said in response that it had maintained from the day of attack that the wounded were outside of the school compound. UNRWA said that the source of the mistake in recent weeks had originated with a separate branch of the United Nations. Senior IDF officials had previously expressed skepticism that the school had been struck, saying that two mortar shells could not kill 43 people and wound dozens more.

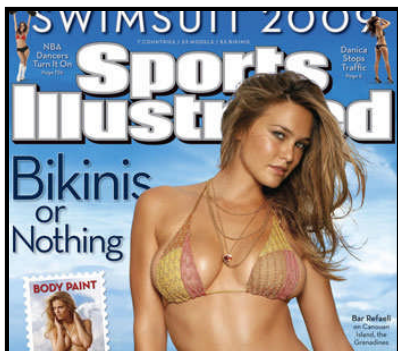
Questions about the veracity of the claims that the school had been hit by the IDF were also raised last week by the Canadian newspaper, The Globe and Mail. The newspaper said that a teacher in the UNRWA compound at the time of the strike "was adamant" that no people had been killed inside the compound. The newspaper quoted the teacher as saying that, "I could see some of the people had been injured... But when I got outside, it was crazy hell. There were bodies everywhere, people dead, injured, flesh everywhere." The newspaper said that the teacher had been told by the UN not to speak to the media. "Three of my students were killed," he said. "But they were all outside."

Separately, The United Nations has said that it is ready to address Hamas's use of children as human shields during last month's IDF offensive in Gaza. UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Radhika Coomaraswamy, told The Jerusalem Post, "We have not yet dealt directly with the human shield issue, but we will now mention it in our reports. It is still very difficult for us to say that it was actually happening and we still need to conduct a full investigation into what exactly took place... but we are not denying that it happened; it is absolutely possible that Hamas was using its civilians as human shields," she said.

However, Coomaraswamy said that the UN's policy not to meet with leading members of the Hamas government - because it was officially considered a terrorist organization - hampered all types of humanitarian relief work in the Gaza Strip. "It makes all our humanitarian jobs very difficult, because we cannot meet with Hamas at a political level," said Coomaraswamy, who met with high-level Israeli and Palestinian Authority officials as well as with many children in both Gaza and Ashkelon to hear about the conflict from a more personal angle.

Israeli Makes Cover of 'Sports Illustrated' Swimsuit Issue

Israeli supermodel Bar Refaeli is on the cover of Sports Illustrated's 2009 swimsuit edition, one of the most prestigious and coveted covers in the modeling world.



The 23-year-old model, who has become known internationally for her relationship with actor Leonardo DiCaprio, told People magazine that she called her family in Israel as soon as she heard the news about the cover. "They are so proud! My grandma says she walks down the street and people ask her, 'Are you Bar Refaeli's grandmother?' I'm like, you're very beautiful, but we don't really look alike! We have 60 years between us. She's so proud. She keeps every single article on me," Refaeli told People.

Refaeli told AP that she had the feeling that the shot of her in the water on Canouan Island in the Grenadines was her shot to be on the front. "This is the one I felt the most comfortable with," said Refaeli, who twice before was featured on the inside pages of the magazine. "You have the beach, blue water and a body. That's it. I liked that the top of the suit was on."