
Israel Votes 2009 – Israeli Democracy in Action

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Column One: Israel's fateful elections

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Caroline Glick, THE JERUSALEM POST

Tuesday's general elections will officially end the briefest and most nonchalant electoral season Israel has ever experienced. Regrettably, the importance of these elections is inversely proportional to their lack of intensity. These are the most fateful elections Israel has ever had. The events of the past week make this point clearly.

On Monday Iran successfully launched a domestically manufactured satellite on a ballistic missile called the Safir-2 space rocket. Since the launch, experts have noted that the Safir-2 can also be used to launch conventional and nonconventional warheads. The Safir-2 has an estimated range of 2,000-3,000 kilometers. And so the successful satellite launch showed that today Iran is capable of launching missiles not only against Israel, but against southern Europe as well.

Many Israeli leaders viewed Monday's launch as a "gotcha" moment. For years they have been saying that Iran's nuclear program is a threat to global security - not merely to Israel's. And Monday's launch demonstrated that they were right all along. Israel isn't the only country on Iran's target list.

Unfortunately for Israel, the international community couldn't care less. Its response to Teheran's latest provocation was to collectively shrug its shoulders.

On Wednesday emissaries of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany convened in Wiesbaden, Germany, to discuss their joint policies toward Iran in the aftermath of the satellite launch. Some Israelis argued that Iran's provocation forced these leaders' hands. Their reputations for toughness were on the line. They would have to do something.

Unfortunately for Israel, the emissaries of Russia, Britain, China, France, Germany and the US are more interested in convincing the mullahs that they are nice than in convincing them that they are tough.

Far from deciding to take concerted action against Iran, the great powers did nothing more than wish the Obama administration good luck as it moves to directly engage the mullahs. As their post-conference press release put it, the six governments' answer to Teheran's show of force was to "agree to consult on the next steps as the US administration undertakes its [Iranian] policy review."

As President Barak Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton have explained, the US is reviewing its policy toward Iran in the hopes of finding a way to directly engage the Iranian government. While they claim that the aim of these sought after direct negotiations will be to convince the mullahs to give up their nuclear weapons program, since taking office the new administration has sent out strong signals that preventing Iran from going nuclear has taken a backseat to simply holding negotiations with Teheran.

According to a report in *Aviation News*, last week the US Navy prevented Israel from seizing an Iranian weapons ship in the Red Sea suspected of carrying illicit munitions bound for either Gaza or Lebanon. A week and a half ago, the US Navy boarded the ship in the Gulf of Aden and carried out a cursory inspection. It demurred from seizing the ship, however, because, as Adm. Michael Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, explained on January 27, the US believed it had no international legal right to seize the vessel.

In inspecting the ship the US was operating under UN Security Council Resolution 1747, which bars Iran from exporting arms. The US argued that it lacked authority to seize the ship because 1747 has no enforcement mechanism. Yet the fact of the matter is that if the US were truly interested in intercepting the ship and preventing the arms from arriving at their destination, the language of 1747 is vague enough to support such a seizure.

And that's the point. The US was uninterested in seizing the ship because it was uninterested in provoking a confrontation with Teheran, which it seeks to engage. It was not due to lack of legal authority that the US reportedly prevented the Israel Navy from seizing the ship in the Red Sea, but due to the administration's fervent wish to appease the mullahs.

Today the ship, which was sailing under a Cypriot flag, is docked in the Port of Limassol. Cypriot authorities have reportedly inspected the ship twice, have communicated their findings to the Security Council, and are still waiting for guidance on how to deal with the ship.

ALL OF this brings us back to next Tuesday's elections. With the US effectively giving up on confronting Iran, the entire burden for blocking Iran's quest for nuclear weapons falls on Israel's shoulders. This means that the most important question that Israeli voters must ask ourselves between now and Tuesday is which leader and which party are most capable of achieving this vital goal?

All we need to do to answer this question is to check what our leaders have done in recent years to bring attention to the Iranian threat and to build coalitions to contend with it.

In late 2006, citing the Iranian nuclear menace, Israel Beiteinu leader Avigdor Lieberman joined the Olmert government where he received the tailor-made title of strategic affairs minister. At the time Lieberman joined the cabinet, the public outcry against the government for its failure to lead Israel to victory in the war with Iran's Lebanese proxy Hizbullah had reached a fever pitch. The smell of new elections was in the air as members of Knesset from all parties came under enormous public pressure to vote no confidence in the government.

By joining the government when he did, Lieberman single-handedly kept the Olmert government in power. Explaining his move, Lieberman claimed that the danger emanating from Iran's nuclear program was so great that Israel could not afford new elections.

But what did he accomplish by saving the government by taking that job? The short answer is nothing. Not only did his presence in the government make no impact on Israel's effectiveness in dealing with Iran, it prolonged the lifespan of a government that had no interest in forming a strategy for contending with Iran by two years.

In light of this fact, perhaps more than any other Israeli politician, Lieberman is to blame for the fact that Israel finds itself today with no allies in its hour of greatest peril. Had he allowed the people to elect more competent leaders in the fall of 2006, we might have been able to take advantage of the waning years of the Bush administration to convince the US to work with us against Iran.

Then there is Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni. If Lieberman was the chief enabler of Israel's incompetent bungling of the Iranian threat, as Israel's chief diplomat, it is Livni - together with Prime Minister Ehud Olmert - who deserves the greatest condemnation for that bungling.

Throughout her tenure as foreign minister and still today as Kadima's candidate for prime minister, Livni claims that she supports using diplomacy to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. But in her three years as Israel's top diplomat, Livni never launched any diplomatic initiative aimed at achieving this goal. In fact, she has never even publicly criticized the European and American attempts to appease the mullahs.

Livni has remained silent for three years even though it has been clear for five years that the West's attempts to cut a deal with Teheran serve no purpose other than to provide the Iranians time to develop their nuclear arsenal. She has played along with the Americans and the Europeans and cheered them on as they passed toothless resolutions against Iran in the Security Council which - as the Iranian weapons ship docked in Cyprus shows - they never had the slightest intention of enforcing.

As for Defense Minister Ehud Barak, as a member of the Olmert government, his main personal failure has been his inability to convince the Pentagon to approve Israel's requests to purchase refueling jets and bunker buster bomb kits, and to permit Israeli jets to fly over Iraqi airspace. To achieve these aims, Barak could have turned to Israel's friends in the US military and in Congress. But he did no such thing. And now, moving into the Obama administration, Israel finds itself with fewer and fewer allies in Washington's security community.

For the past several years, only one political leader in Israel has had the foresight and wisdom to both understand the dangers of Iran's nuclear program and to understand the basis for an Israeli diplomatic approach to contending with the threat that can serve the country's purposes regardless of whether or not at the end of the day, Israel is compelled to act alone.

In 2006, Likud leader Binyamin Netanyahu took it upon himself to engage the American people in a discussion of the danger Iran poses not only to Israel but to the world as a whole. In late 2006, he began meeting with key US governors and state politicians to convince them to divest their state employees' pension funds from companies that do business with Iran. This initiative and complementary efforts by the Washington-based Center for Security Policy convinced dozens of state legislatures to pass laws divesting their pension funds from companies that do business with Iran.

Netanyahu also strongly backed the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs' initiative to indict Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as an international war criminal for inciting genocide. Both the divestment campaign and the campaign against Ahmadinejad have been Israel's most successful public diplomacy efforts in contending with Iran. More than anything done by the government, these initiatives made Americans aware of the Iranian nuclear threat and so forced the issue onto the agendas of all the presidential candidates.

Instead of supporting Netanyahu's efforts, Livni, Barak and Lieberman have disparaged them or ignored them. Because he is the only leader who has done anything significant to fight Iran's nuclear program, Netanyahu is the only national leader who has the international credibility to be believed when he says - as he did this week - that Israel will not allow Iran to acquire nuclear weapons. Likud under Netanyahu is the only party that has consistently drawn the connection between Iran, its Palestinian, Lebanese, Iraqi and Afghan terror proxies, its Syrian client state and its nuclear weapons program, and made fighting this axis the guiding principle of its national security strategy.

GIVEN THE US-led international community's decision not to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, it is clear that in the coming months Israel will need to do two things. It will need to put the nations of the world on notice that they cannot expect us to stand by idly as they welcome Iran into the nuclear club. And Israel will need to prepare plans to strike Iran's nuclear installations without America's support.

More than ever before, Israel requires leaders who understand the gravity of the hour and are capable of acting swiftly and wisely to safeguard our country from destruction. Only Netanyahu and Likud have a credible track record on this subject. For the sake of our country, our nation and our posterity, it is our responsibility to consider this fact when we enter the voting booths on Tuesday.
