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Gaza War Gives Bigger Lift to Israel's Right Than to Those in Power

By ISABEL KERSHNER

JERUSALEM — With two weeks to go before the Israeli elections, the politicians who seem to have benefited the most from the military offensive against [Hamas](#) in [Gaza](#) are those who were not involved in planning or carrying out the war.

That is not because Israelis have regrets or have become faint-hearted about the casualties and destruction in Gaza. To the contrary, there appears to have been a shift further to the right, reflecting a feeling among many voters that an even tougher approach may now be required.

Recent polls indicate that Likud, [Benjamin Netanyahu](#) 's right-wing opposition party, has retained and even increased its lead. The other party that appears to have gained the most ground is the nationalist Yisrael Beiteinu, led by Avigdor Lieberman.

A hawkish legislator and former minister, Mr. Lieberman pulled his party out of the governing coalition a year ago when [Israel](#) began negotiations over [Palestinian](#) statehood with the Palestinian leadership in the West Bank, which is viewed as more moderate and pragmatic than Hamas.

[President Obama](#) said on his second day in office that his administration would “actively and aggressively seek” an Israeli-Palestinian peace. In Israel, though, the popular discourse is less about peace than realpolitik and security as the Feb. 10 elections draw near.

“The mood in the country” fits Mr. Netanyahu’s “line,” said Asher Arian of the Israel Democracy Institute, an independent research institute in Jerusalem.

The Likud leader is presenting himself first as a champion of security, and then as a good steward of the economy. Mr. Netanyahu also talks of advancing practical arrangements with the Palestinians and says that if elected he will try to form as broad a governing coalition as possible, partly to appeal to the Israeli mainstream and partly to allay international fears about the upheavals a far-right-wing government could bring.

The three-week war against Hamas, the Islamic militant group that controls Gaza, won broader public support here than almost any other Israeli military campaign.

Yet two of its main protagonists lag behind Mr. Netanyahu in the polls. [Tzipi Livni](#) , the foreign minister and leader of the centrist Kadima Party, which won the last elections in 2006, remains in second place. But the gap between her and Mr. Netanyahu has grown.

[Ehud Barak](#) , the defense minister and Labor Party leader, has long been unpopular. While the Gaza campaign gave him a boost, he is still trailing badly.

Under the electoral system, the leader of the party that wins the most votes gets the chance to form a governing coalition and to become prime minister. Israelis say they generally prefer Mr. Barak as defense minister.

Mr. Netanyahu was the front-runner even before the Gaza offensive. Since the war, Mr. Lieberman's star has begun to rise. His party holds 11 seats in the 120-seat Parliament. Four opinion polls in the past week have given Yisrael Beiteinu 16 seats, with the party edging ahead of the center-left Labor Party in three polls and tying with it in the fourth.

In 1978, when he was 20, Mr. Lieberman immigrated to Israel from Moldova, then a Soviet republic, and he lives in a Jewish settlement in the West Bank. Popular with the country's so-called Russian vote, he is vocal about the threat from Iran and advocates swapping areas of Israel that are heavily populated by Arab citizens for parts of the West Bank that are populated by Israeli Jews.

Some of the rising popularity of Mr. Netanyahu and Mr. Lieberman may be a result of the frustration among those Israelis who believe that the war in Gaza did not go far enough.

Although the government was clear in setting limited goals for the war — stopping Palestinian militants from launching rockets against Israel — part of the public seemed to have “its own expectations,” like, for example, the collapse of Hamas, said Yehuda Ben Meir, a public opinion expert at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv.

Ms. Livni is campaigning on a platform of continuing negotiations with the Palestinians for a two-state solution, and contends that any Israeli government that fails to do so will quickly find itself in conflict with the new administration in the United States.

But Ms. Livni came out of the war seeming “a bit wishy-washy,” said Gadi Wolfsfeld, a political science professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Though she took a hard line on Hamas, Ms. Livni did not gain much credit for the nation's display of military might. In Washington to sign the memorandum of understanding on preventing weapons smuggling into Gaza, she was absent when Israel declared a cease-fire, damaging her image of relevancy.

Many here believe that Prime Minister [Ehud Olmert](#) is not going out of his way to root for his successor in Kadima, still smarting over the fact that Ms. Livni, along with Mr. Barak, had pressed for him to resign over corruption allegations.

In a final twist, the police on Sunday detained seven associates of Mr. Lieberman for questioning, including his daughter, who has since been released to house arrest, as part of a longstanding investigation into his finances. The police suspect Mr. Lieberman of money laundering, fraud and breach of trust, although he has never been charged. But many commentators here say the police attention will only help Mr. Lieberman, a perennial suspect.

“Just look at the Russian-language Internet sites,” wrote Lily Galili in the newspaper Haaretz on Monday, “where Lieberman has once again become the persecuted Russian immigrant, the representative of all such immigrants ever victimized by the police.”
