

# COMMENTARY

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## Israel's Leadership Vacuum

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Israel's political system is dragging the country ever closer to complete paralysis, leaving critical national issues unresolved and threatening fateful consequences. While it is true that Israel enjoys a full-fledged democracy, effective democracy that serves national interests must be based on advice and consent between conflicting parties. The rights to hold different views and form political parties – elements inherent in democracy – are not ends in and of themselves. The strength of any democratic political system is not measured by the plethora of political parties but rather by their ability to forge a consensus that serves the larger national interest of the country; guided by visionary and courageous leaders, these parties can effect real change for the better.

For Israel to have thirty-four parties registered in the upcoming January elections suggests not only the country's deep political divide, but also in part explains the dearth of creative and bold leaders answering the national call, around whom many of these parties could coalesce. With the exception of four major political blocs – right, centre, left and Palestinian Arabs in Israel – all of these old or newly formed parties share similar views that trump their political and ideological differences. Sadly, however, what stands in the way of creating a cohesive block is their leaders' political ambition coupled with the self-indulgent belief that he or she can tackle the national ailments better than anyone else.

One can point to the egocentric cases of Yair Lapid, a noted Israeli television anchor, and former opposition leader Tzipi Livni, both of whom formed their own parties instead of joining hands and inviting other parties with similar political leanings, thus uniting a centrist and left-of-centre party to effectively compete with Netanyahu's rightist block. The consequence of this political environment is a lack of national consensus to solve difficult and debilitating conflicts, especially

the Israeli-Palestinians', which is becoming ever more complex, self-consuming, and demanding of a resolution that meets the principle requirements of both sides.

From its inception, all Israeli governments have been coalitions with no single party achieving an absolute majority in the Knesset, the Israeli parliament. Traditionally, governments have consisted of a handful of parties that more often than not agree on the basic issues facing the nation, but are unable to reach a consensus to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict, which has confronted the state from the day of its birth in 1948. Additionally, the nature of the coalition government system allows smaller parties to wield significant leverage far beyond their parliamentary strength, providing them with the ability to threaten the dissolution of the government if their demands are not met or if they simply disagree with the majority views within the government.

Moreover, the Prime Minister can call for an early election when he or she feels that an early election in a certain political environment can enhance his or her own (or party's) strength, as is the case with PM Netanyahu's decision to hold early elections this January. This fractious nature has led few Israeli governments to last for a full parliamentary term (four years); the lack of overarching consensus results in highly divisive governing coalitions, forcing them to collapse under their own weight.

With the exception of David Ben-Gurion (who counselled the Israelis to treat the Palestinians with sensitivity), Menachem Begin (who courageously signed the peace treaty with Egypt), Yitzhak Rabin (who secured the Oslo accords) and Ariel Sharon (who withdrew from Gaza), there has been no Israeli leader that had the vision and stature to follow their footsteps – a leader who could lead a government and effect a major change in Israeli life and favourably alter the public mindset in relation to the Arab world. For the past two decades, Israeli political leaders have shuffled between the left and right with little to show in terms of reaching a legitimate (and most importantly, lasting) agreement with the Palestinians. Corruption has had noted influence in Israeli politics, with both Foreign Ministers Lieberman and Olmert indicted on corruption charges. With poetic justice, the former has just resigned and the latter has stated his non-intention to run in the upcoming elections, even though he could have been a consensus builder in connection with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Since an agreement must be reached between parties forming a coalition, out of necessity these parties largely ignore difficult issues in the interest of maintaining their political contract. Due to the debilitating effects of political ideology or religious concerns, coalitions often settle for working on the lowest denominator issues, thus relegating major if not "existential" issues to the margins. In reviewing the record of the Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations, typically both

sides have abrogated their responsibilities, preferring to “kick the can down the road” out of cynical convenience or lack of willingness to make serious concessions.

Religiously based political parties are particularly unmoved, as by definition they are extremely resistant to significant compromise, insisting that what God has ordained is not subject to negotiation. The ultra-orthodox party Shas, for instance, may consider certain territorial concessions in the West Bank; but relinquishing East Jerusalem would violate their religious conviction that the Jewish people have a “biblical right” to the Holy City. As such, a coalescing figure is needed to rally the non-religious parties while either diffusing the leverage that the minority religious parties exercise or providing a credible interpretation of the Bible’s reference to Jerusalem to allow for a compromise about the future of the city.

An effective coalition cannot govern without a plan of action that is tethered to widespread popular and political support, yet the fear of dissolution as a result of making significant concessions prevents a concerted effort to tackle the Arab-Israeli conflict. Major reforms are needed in Israel’s body politic in order to foster an effective form of governance that directly confronts and ultimately resolves the pressing issues that directly impact Israel’s identity, long-term viability as a state, and perhaps its very survival. Among the more pressing reforms is the qualifying threshold to gain seats in the Knesset, which now stands at 2% and is a contributing factor to the highly fragmented nature of Israeli politics.

As a young nation, Israel’s democratic system is still in the early stages of maturation, yet its governing framework has had a regressive effect on Israel’s development of a functioning democracy. The Jewish people are also a factor in the equation; to wit, former Prime Minister Golda Meir once said Israel is a country of “three million prime ministers.” Moreover, the unique experiences of Diaspora Jewry, coming to Israel from scores of different countries, has led to a proliferation of contrasting opinions and a difficulty in reaching a consensus on any given issue. After three generations, however, the Israelis must come to terms with their reality because they cannot build a new nation while still paralyzed from the bondage of their Diaspora experiences. Without a widespread effort to reform the political system, Israel will become a pariah state, all occurring under the unfocused gaze of the country’s “leaders” as they squabble over their own personal political fortunes at the expense of the state they supposedly represent.

It has been said, however, that leaders are a reflection of their generation; a complacent and apathetic public, even in the face of dangerous issues confronting the nation, may well produce mediocre leaders that follow the mood of the nation. Such a state of mind, however, can also produce unrelenting ideologues like Netanyahu who trade on the public’s most sensitive issue – national security – as an excuse or cover to pursue a more sinister agenda: the expansion of settlements or making borders central to Israel’s national security. Is it any wonder that more

than 400 thousand Israelis demonstrated last year in Tel Aviv demanding affordable housing and better pay, but not a single demonstration of any magnitude took place demanding an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

A mature and stable democracy that faces no imminent danger, such as that of France or Great Britain, can afford mediocre leadership for a while without encountering serious threats to national security; a country like Israel, alas, does not enjoy that luxury. A leadership vacuum can and will have dangerous national ramifications. Without a rise in the Israeli public consciousness of their political plight and the dangers of what lies ahead, neither the next Israeli election nor the one that follows will make any difference in Israel's continuing slide toward an uncertain and precarious future.

That said, Israel has scores of brilliant and skilful potential political leaders who can rise to the challenges of the hour; as of yet, they have shied away from political activism because of the dirty name, corruption, and scandals that have been attached to Israeli politics. The nation is hungry for such leaders who must now answer the call and chart a new course to lead the nation to what it was destined to be: a prosperous nation at peace with itself and with its neighbours.

**Note:** This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir's web portal.

Web Link: <http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/israels-leadership-vacuum/>

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