



Israeli Elections

February 2009

Guide To Israel's Elections

(The information contained in this primer was taken from public sources including Israel's Knesset and the parties themselves; MediaCentral is not responsible for any statements made by any party and does not endorse any party for this election.)

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The Electoral System

Israel has an electoral system based on nation-wide proportional representation. The number of seats that each party list receives in the Knesset - the House of Representatives - is proportional to the number of votes it receives. To gain a seat, a party must pass the qualifying threshold, currently 2% of the national vote. There are a total of 120 seats in the Knesset.

Every Israeli citizen of 18 years of age or older has a right to vote. However, voting is restricted to the voter's permanent place of residence. Soldiers on active duty vote in special polling stations in their units, and arrangements are made for prison inmates and hospital patients. There is no absentee ballot.

Any Israeli citizen 21 years or older can run for office. Those holding certain official positions, such as the President of the State, judges, and senior civil servants, may not stand for election to the Knesset unless they resign from their post 100 days or 6 months before the elections, depending on the public position, as the law specifies.

Elections take place every four years, though the Knesset can decide, by an ordinary majority, to dissolve itself and call for early elections.

The Knesset can also decide, by a special majority, to prolong its term beyond four years. In either case of delayed or early elections, the newly formed Knesset is meant to serve a full four-year term from the date of elections as determined by the law, regardless of the election date.

The contest in the elections is among party lists of candidates. Only a party that has been legally registered, or an alignment of two or more registered parties that have decided to run in the elections together, can present a list of candidates and participate in the elections.

A party can informally add to its list non-member or non-registered bodies or personalities.

For example, in the elections for the fifteenth Knesset, the Unified Arab List included contenders from the Democratic Arab Party, a registered party, and individuals from the Islamic Movement, a non-registered party.

A party list that acts directly or indirectly against the existence of the State of Israel as the state of the Jewish people or against its democratic nature may not run. A list that incites racism, one that supports the armed struggle of an enemy state or a terrorist organization against the State of Israel may not run in the election.

The candidates of any list are elected to the Knesset in the order in which they appear on it. If a certain party received sufficient votes for 10 seats, the first 10 candidates on its list will enter the Knesset. If a Knesset member passes away or resigns his seat in the Knesset, the next on the list will replace him or her.

The modern electoral system is based on the political system of the Yishuv, the organized Jewish community in Mandatory Palestine. In this period, major, far-reaching and rapid changes took place in the make-up of the population, and various groups sought political representation. Thus, many parties were created to enable maximum expression of opinions. This underlying theme still holds today as more than thirty parties run in this year's election.

For more information on the electoral system see: http://www.knesset.gov.il/description/eng/eng_mimshal_beh.htm

Statistics for the Israeli Elections 2006

Israel's elections for the seventeenth Knesset, held on 28 March 2006, had a turnout of 3,186,739 Israelis, or 63.6 per cent of the eligible voting population.

The 120 Knesset seats were divided among ten parties as follows:

The newly-formed, centrist **Kadima** party, led by Ehud Olmert, received 29 seats. As the largest party in the Knesset, it was asked to form the government.

The incumbent **Likud** government, led by Benjamin Netanyahu, lost 15 seats, bringing its number of seats down to 12.

Labor-Meimad, led by Amir Peretz, lost two seats, bringing its number of seats down to 19.

The ultra-Orthodox party **Shas** gained one seat, bringing its number of seats up to 12.

Yisrael Beytenu gained eight seats, bringing its number of seats up to eleven.

National Union-National Religious Party lost one seat, bringing its number of seats down to nine.

Gil gained an unexpected seven seats.

United Torah Judaism gained one seat, bringing its number of seats up to six.

Meretz-Yachas lost one seat, bringing number of seats down to five.

United Arab List-Ta'al gained two seats, bringing its number of seats up to four.

The other parties that ran in the 2006 elections – **Hadash, Balad, the Green Party, Ale Yarok, the Jewish National Front, Tafnit, Hetz** and **Shinui** – did not reach the threshold required (two per cent of the national vote) to gain a seat.

Currently, the coalition comprises three main parties – Kadima, Labor and Shas.

Voter Demographics

The Arab community comprises 20 per cent of the Israeli population. In the 2006 elections, 56 per cent of Arab-Israelis voted, compared with a 62 per cent turnout in 2003. Indeed, there has been a steady decline in the number of Arab voters since the 1950s, when 90 per cent of the community voted.

There are currently more than one million 'new immigrants' from the former Soviet Union in Israel. In the 2006 elections, 63 per cent of new immigrants voted, mainly for Yisrael Beytenu. In the 2003 elections, new immigrants comprised 15 per cent of all voters.

The Parties and their respective demographic bases at the 2006 elections

On the right of the Israeli political spectrum, the secular nationalist party Likud has a strong base in the Mizrahi community; the National Union-National Religious Party has strong support from the Settlers' movement and religious Jews; and Yisrael Beytenu is popular among new immigrants from the former Soviet Union.

At the center of the Israeli political spectrum sits Kadima, which is supported by both Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews, and Gil, which is popular among elderly retirees.

On the left of the Israeli political spectrum, the Labor-Meimad party finds support among secular Ashkenazi Jews, Kibbutzniks, religious Zionists and Israeli Arabs, while Meretz is popular with secular Ashkenazi Jews.

Of the Ultra-Orthodox parties, Shas draws electoral support primarily from Israel's large Moroccan and Sephardic community, while United Torah Judaism draws electoral support from both Hasidic movements and the anti-Hasidic Lithuanian Ultra-Orthodox community.

Of the Arab/Non-Zionist parties, Hadash and Balad draw electoral support from secular Israeli-Arabs, while Ra'am-Ta'al draws electoral support largely from Muslim Israeli-Arabs and Bedouins.

Major Parties and Their Contact Information

Kadima

Led by Tzipi Livni

<http://www.kadima.org.il>

Phone 03-978-8000

Fax 03-978-8020

Spokesperson: Shmulik Dahan 054 252 5292

Maya Jacobs 052 386 1615

Ariel Sharon founded Kadima in 2005. In January 2006, following Sharon's stroke, Olmert became the party leader.

Since 2007, Olmert has conducted negotiations with the PA aimed at reaching a "shelf agreement" for Israel-Palestinian peace. Livni has repeatedly denounced terror and has placed clear emphasis on the legitimacy of Israel and of Zionist ideology.

Domestically, Kadima sees itself as a practical mid-point between Benjamin Netanyahu's "conservative" economics and Labor's "socialism."

Seats won at last election = 29

Avoda (Labor)

Led by Ehud Barak

<http://www.avoda.org.il>

Phone 03-689-9444

Fax 03-689-9410

Spokesperson: Leor Rotbart 052 274 9906

Yoav Sivan 054 220 4002

Labor supports a two-state solution, the removal of isolated settlements and completion of the security barrier. It wants to restart negotiations with the Palestinians based upon the "land for peace" formula within the framework of the Oslo Accords. However, they will not negotiate directly with Hamas, although they would still consider negotiations with moderate PA leaders (Mahmud Abbas).

Economically, Labor says that it favors increasing the minimum wage, guaranteeing pensions to every employee, and increasing social security benefits for the elderly and the handicapped.

Seats won at last election = 19

Likud

Led by Benjamin Netanyahu

<http://en.netanyahu.org.il>

Phone 03-621-0847

Spokesperson: Nili 054 4900 294

Ron Dermer 054 462 2652

Dina Libster 054 561 5793

Under Netanyahu, Israel's foreign and security policy would emphasize "defensible borders," whereby Israel would retain the Jordan Valley, the Golan Heights, an undivided Jerusalem and the West Bank settlement blocs.

Netanyahu speaks of an "economic peace" plan for the Palestinians in which significant, long-term economic and political development is necessary in the Palestinian Authority before a permanent diplomatic agreement can be reached. Netanyahu has also led a push for increased Western financial and economic sanctions against Iran.

Building on Netanyahu's record as finance minister earlier from 2003-2005, Likud also promises a "steady hand" in managing the troubled Israeli economy.

Seats won at last election = 12

Shas

Led by Eli Yishai

<http://www.shasnet.org.il>

<http://www.shasnet.org.il/Front/NewsNet/newspaper.asp>

Phone 02-666-7125

Spokesperson: Margerite Taguri 054 846 1971

Roei Lachmanovich 050 624 0925

An ultra-Orthodox party that draws electoral support primarily from Israel's large Moroccan and Sephardic community, Shas has been a member of almost every government since the early 1990s, and repeatedly has been the key swing party in Israeli coalition politics. Many of its voters are not themselves Orthodox or ultra-Orthodox. Nevertheless they respect Shas's devotion to traditional Judaism and benefit from the party's subsidized educational and social service networks.

Shas has stood apart from the other Haredi parties by its pragmatic approach to territorial compromise if such action would save lives. Shas is opposed to unilateral territorial concessions or negotiations with Hamas, and opposed to any division of Jerusalem.

Seats won at last election = 12

Israel Beytenu

Led by Avidgor Liberman

<http://beytenu.org/>

Phone 02-501-2999

Fax 02-537-7188

Spokesperson: Irena Etinger 054 8077 410

Israel Beytenu believes that the "land for peace approach" is fundamentally flawed and that only a "land for land – peace for peace" approach, in which both parties compromise and commit to certain terms, can succeed. Thus, it supports the exchange of land highly populated by Arabs for land with Jewish settlements as a viable proposal for solving the

Israel-Palestinian conflict. The party supports completely cutting off ties with Gaza and its separation from the West Bank, and mandatory army or National Service for all citizens, specifically in order to be eligible for any state benefits.

The party seeks the maintenance of the Jewish character of the State as a balance of tradition, Zionism, modernity and tolerance as a political and educational imperative. It supports changing the religious status quo, easing the conversion process for those who wish to join the Jewish people, and introducing civil marriage in Israel.

It also supports more funding for healthcare, education, the police force, and the environment.

Seats won at last election =11

Ichud Leumi

<http://www.leumi.org.il/english/>

Spokesperson: Naama Cohen 050 867 0982

This party strives to establish the rights of the Jewish people for the whole of the Jewish land (Greater Israel). It aims to give a Jewish character to the state of Israel and to accomplish eternal values for the people and bring the Jews of the diaspora back to Israel. The party aims to increase Jewish education in public schools, universities and the army, and wants to give Jewish values to all Jews. The party strives to increase bible studies, knowledge of Jewish history and to strengthen national identity. They are against any other established entity anywhere in Israel, will act to settle the whole of Israel and wish to give control over the Temple Mount back to the Jews. In order to solve the Arab refugee problem they would institute an international agreement that would send the Arabs back to Arab nations.

Seats won at last election (combined with Mafdal) = 9

HaBayit HaYehudi (The Jewish Home)

Led by Daniel Hershkovitz

<http://www.mafdal.org.il>

Spokesperson: Moshe Sheinbal 052 385 0617

Formed from a group of right-wing and religious parties headed by Mafdal (National Religious Party), HaBayit HaYehudi is completely against any form of territorial compromise, willing only to trade "peace for peace" with the Palestinians and the Arab world. It opposes the creation of a Palestinian state west of the Jordan River, and favors the maintenance and expansion of the settlement system in the West Bank. It is adamant that Jerusalem remain completely under Jewish sovereignty, and wants to expand the scope of Israeli control over Temple Mount. HaBayit HaYehudi supports limited autonomy for the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza.

The party supports the promulgation of laws explicitly declaring the state's Jewish nature and historical heritage, and wants the Jewish character of the state emphasized more significantly in the education system. Economically, HaBayit HaYehudi supports increasing funding for housing, immigrant aid, and medical care.

Seats won at last election (combined with Ichud Leumi) = 9

Minor and New Parties and Contact Information

Gil (Pensioner's Party)

<http://www.gimlaim.org.il/>

Led by Rafi Eitan

Phone 03-561-1900

Fax 03-624-7159

Spokesperson: Danny Borowitz 052 812 0202

Gil has been in existence since the early 1990s, though it did not have any seats in the Knesset until the 2006 election when the party won an unexpected seven seats.

As the pensioner's party, Gil seeks to protect pension rights, the right to housing for Israeli pensioners, and to enlarge national health insurance and services for pensioners. Gil also supports the protection of traditional Jewish values and the advancement of democratic values.

Seats won at last election = 7

United Torah Judaism

Led by Yaakov Litzman

Phone 02-675-3556/02-675-3501

Spokesperson: Chaim Yustman 050 412 1212 or 057 312 1212

UTJ is a coalition comprised of two Ashkenazi Haredi parties: Agudat Israel, representing various Hasidic movements in Israel, and Degel Hatorah, representing the non-Hasidic Lithuanian ultra-Orthodox community.

UTJ's political orientation is non-Zionist. Although it agrees to join coalition governments, it sometimes declines to take on full ministerial responsibility, for to do so would suggest acceptance of the secular Israeli state and a rejection of the religious anticipation for a messianic salvation.

The party's primary interest is maximum application of Orthodox practices to Israeli life, and the extension of housing and social benefits to its burgeoning population.

Seats won at last election = 6

The New Party – Meretz (formerly Meretz-Yahad)

Led by Haim Oron

<http://www.myparty.org.il>

Phone 03-609-8998

Fax 03-696-1728

Spokesperson: Mali Cohen 050 320 7800

The Citizens Rights Movement (CRM), Mapam, and Shinui founded Meretz in 1992 as a union of the three parties.

Meretz seeks a just and comprehensive peace with the Arab world. The party believes that this peace can only be achieved by reaching a permanent settlement with the Palestinian people, and signing peace treaties with Syria and Lebanon.

Domestically, Meretz focuses on issues regarding human and civil rights, social justice, and the environment.

Seats won at last election = 5

Ra'am-Ta'al (United Arab List)

Led by Ibrahim Tsartur

Phone 02-640-8141

Spokesperson: Kiffah Abed Alhalim 054 554 8583

Shaheen Sarsour 052 528 25580

The UAL is one of the two major Arab slates. It supports a two-state solution, with Israel ceding all territories captured in 1967, including all of East Jerusalem, to the Palestinian state. The UAL also advocates a solution to the refugee issue on the basis of relevant UN resolutions.

The party supports equal rights for all citizens and separation of religion and state. It favors mandatory education about the historical experiences of the Arab Palestinian population. The UAL advocates the establishment of an Arab university in Israel.

Economically, the UAL desires affirmative action to benefit Israeli Arabs, and the improvement of infrastructure and services in Arab areas.

On 13 January, the Knesset's Central Election Committee banned the UAL and Balad from running in the upcoming Knesset elections. This ban is pending a Supreme Court ruling, which is expected to reverse the decision, especially where UAL is concerned.

Seats won at last election = 4

Hadash (The Democratic Front for Peace and Equality)

Led by Mohammed Barakeh

<http://www.hadash2009.org.il/english>

Spokesperson: Ramsi Chakim 054 289 9383

Yoana Gonen 050 793 6216, Hisham Naff'a 054 285 9122

A joint Arab-Jewish party, Hadash believes in a two-state solution, the dismantling of all settlements east of the Green Line, and the return to the Palestinians of all territory captured by the Israelis in 1967, including East Jerusalem. It believes in a "just settlement of the refugee issue."

The party sees Israel as a "state for all its citizens," and believes both in full civil equality between Jewish and Arab citizens, and in complete separation of religion and state.

Hadash has a communist-socialist economic outlook on most issues of economic policy. It believes in affirmative action to improve the conditions of the Arab minority. The party believes in a rigorous policy of environmental protection.

Seats won at last election = 3

Balad (The National Democratic Assembly)

Led by Jamal Zahalka

<http://www.tajamoa.org/>

Phone 02-675-3171

Spokesperson: Tareq Berkdar 054 429 0725

Balad supports complete withdrawal of Israel from the territories captured in 1967, and a Palestinian state with its capital in Jerusalem. It believes in the "right of return" for Arab refugees of Israel's wars.

Balad seeks complete separation between religion and state, and wants to revoke the official status of Zionist organizations like the Jewish National Fund. It demands "cultural autonomy" for the Arab minority.

Balad wants to remove any discrimination against Arabs present in the national budget.

See Ra'am-Ta'al for information of Balad's current standing to run in this year's Knesset race.

Seats won at last election = 3

Meimad-Israel Green Movement

<http://meimad.org.il/>

http://yeruka.org.il/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=724&Itemid=249Phone

02-672-5134

Fax 02-672-5051

E-mail info@meimad.org

Meimad Spokesperson: Nir Hirshman 054-444-7962

Green Movement Spokesperson: 077-532-1168

Rabbi Yehuda Amital founded the Meimad movement in 1988 to transform the face of religious Zionism, often perceived as extremist. The movement became a political party in 1999. Meimad believes that there should be a new basis for the relationship between religion and state in Israel. The party seeks an end to the politicization of religious services in Israel, which would change the status quo on issues of marriage, Sabbath, and burial. It also supports mandatory national service for the ultra-orthodox. Meimad supports the continuation of the political peace process with the Palestinians, though in a final agreement on Judea and Samaria, Meimad seeks transfer of concentrated areas of Jewish settlement to Israeli sovereignty. Jerusalem, too, would be under Israeli sovereignty.

The Israel Green Movement is concerned with environmental awareness and social and economic justice.

Seats won at last election = 0

Da'am - Worker's Party

Phone 03-537-3268, Fax 03-537-3269

An Arab-Israeli party striving for socialist change, working with other socialist parties against capitalism and religious fundamentalism.

Seats won at last election = 0

Social Fighters United (Lechem)

Email lehem_1@walla.com

This party wants to fight corruption, poverty and social inequality; improve levels of employment; invest in education and environmental issues. In Knesset, they would work against the behavior of banks towards people who owe the banks money. They are also against the activities of the police against immigrants. They want to increase pensions and increase social welfare, work against big salaries in the public sector and in the elected sector.

Seats won at last election = 0

Party for the Struggle with the Banks

Phone 04-676-7087

Spokesperson: Batya 050 524 6770

This party wants to fight public corruption and change bank commissions.

Seats won at last election = 0

The Green Party

<http://www.green-party.co.il/Election2009/more/english>

Phone 03-629-0833

Spokesperson: Ido Tandovsky 050 255 5489

Email spokesman@green-party.org.il

They approach every person equally, without discriminating against religion, age or sex. Everyone should be able to control their own life and together form a healthy community. Earth has ecological and social problems and Israel, due to its security issues, has even worse ecological and social problems than many other countries. This party puts "the person" at the center of society. Main issues of the Green Party include the welfare of government and people, which should come before the government and initiators of big building projects etc, the end to the destruction of the environment, preserving the country, civil freedom, smart development (to help the environment) and political cooperation with Israel's neighbors on environmental issues and on issues of peace.

Seats won at last election = 0

Ale Yarok (Green Leaf)

Led by Boaz Wachtel

<http://www.ale-yarok.org.il>

E-mail aleyarokparty@gmail.com

The Ale Yarok (Green Leaf) party supports equal human rights, boosting individual freedoms, the right for homosexuals to marry, and the legalization of soft drugs.

The party pledges to protect nature and the environment and to introduce government subsidization of organic agriculture, promote government help for artists, and support

animal rights. It also calls for better treatment for the victims of violence, hard drugs, and alcohol.

Ale Yarok also supports two states for two nations, Israel and Palestine.

Seats won at last election = 0

Brit Olam

<http://www.brit-olam.org/>

The main platform of this party is achieving peace, representing all those from within and outside of Israel who wish to achieve peace. Their platform suggests complete change, based on understanding that peace is the main value of Israel's leadership. The party includes both Arab and Israeli representatives.

Seats won at last election = 0

Tzomet

Phone 077-516-6021

Tzomet (*Crossroads*) is a small secular, right-wing political party in Israel. The party was the one who first brought the "peace for peace" slogan, which today is used by all Israeli right-wing parties and movements. "Peace for peace" means that Israel should not give up territories to get real peace, and if Arabs really want peace they should stop the policy of demanding lands using threats but give up on their demands. The party supports a separation of religion and state.

Seats won at last election = 0

Party for the Rights of Man

Phone 03-687-8572

Fax 03-639-2040

Email shloser@netvision.net.il

This party wishes to strengthen the constitutional law for human freedom and achieve equality between men and women in all aspects of society. They call for equality in education, public housing, equality before the law and the strengthening of citizen's rights and democracy. They wish to protect the rights of man in society.

Seats won at last election = 0

Heart Party

Phone 03-5043041

The Heart Party was made for immigrants to Israel from central Asia to give small ethnic groups in Israel representation and fight for their rights. They want to make these new Israeli citizens more involved in Israel's politics and help them with their unique problems and interests.

Seats won at last election = 0

Israel is Strong

<http://www.israelhazaka.org.il/14-en/Homepage.aspx>

Phone 03-689-9338

of Email info@israelhazaka.org.il

Spokesperson: Tom Wegner 054 800 0358

The party was created to assure Israel's future existence by strengthening its foundation values and morals and strengthening its stand against external threats. In order to achieve this, Israel must be a social country with a modern economy, must strengthen the army and strive for peace with its neighbors, and safeguard the environment.

Did not run last election

The Israelis

<http://www.haisraelim.org/contact.asp>

This party calls for a political change, firstly calling for regional elections which will give better representation in government. They also call for a more expert-based government and the creation of a constitution. The party strives for equal representation for men and women and endorses a change in the political culture.

Did not run last election

Responsibility (Ahrayut)

Phone 054 637 1079

Email achrayut2009@gmail.com

"Responsibility" strives for change in the political system, both in the primary elections, internal party elections and in the main elections for the country. Emphasizing personal responsibility, they wish also to build a new system focusing on a "wider picture" mentality, fighting against corruption and obligating leaders to take responsibility for their actions.

Did not run last election

Party of the Youth of Israel

Phone 03-639-4940

Fax 03-639-4939

The message of this party is to focus on the values of social involvement and responsibility of young people for the future of the communities they live in and the future of the state. The mutual purpose of the party members is to make the youth of Israel more conscious of values, more involved in society and educated and willing to accomplish their destiny - to be the leaders of the next generation.

Did not run last election

Party for Change in Education

Email info@edu2009.org.il

The party emphasizes education as the essential force for an advanced society, a stable economy and national strength. They wish to give the opportunity to all students to fulfill their potential, dedicating the efforts of society to that end. The party will also advance social, cultural and environmental issues, quality of life, and peace and security for all sectors of Israeli society.

Did not run last election

Immigration to Israel

Phone 07-221-12041

Spokesperson: Alex Waldman 077-550-6692

The 'Aliyah' party is a social party that deals mainly with the day-to-day, social aspects of Israeli life. The party's main focus is to find solutions to Israel's economic problems, decreasing poverty by implementing a more European style economy that would spread welfare accordingly and fairly to the different sectors of society, such as the young and old, single parents, couples and so on. Renting and buying homes in Israel would be made more affordable and attention would be given to education, especially in universities.

Did not run last election

"Move" (Lazuz)

Email lazuz2008@gmail.com

"Move" wants to put more government emphasis on inter-party consensus. They will support every coalition on the condition that they accept a new law that will limit the payment to those in elected positions, and that the saved money (from this pay-cut) will then go to issues over which the coalition parties find consensus - education, public health, environment, youth, young ex-soldiers, lowering taxes, dealing with growing violence and transportation.

Did not run last election

Party for the Power to Influence

Phone 054 485 9922/09-861-2576

Created by a disabled man, Yochai Dok, the party wishes to advance disability rights, working for the rights for all those who need, and do not receive, help. It emphasizes the need for a united party for all disabled organisations, giving them more leverage to influence government policy.

Did not run last election

Light Party (Or)

Phone 03-560-0588

Email orr@orr.org.il

This party upholds the fight against religious fundamentalism, and wants a separation between state and religion. Their vision is an enlightened and democratic state that will

function according to the UN Human Rights Act, a cultural society that will act for the Declaration of Independence and will have clear borders. They believe in democracy, Zionism and freedom. Some of their main principles are the protection of humanity, equality, education and human dignity. They wish to prevent intervention in the private lives of the country's citizens, preserving the principles of equality and emphasizing humanism and pluralism. Loyalty to the state is very important, and there should be conscription for all citizens, including the orthodox communities.

Did not run last election

Green Leaves with Holocaust Survivors Party

Phone 07-22113949

<http://ale-yarok.org/english/>

This is a new, liberal party made up of a combination of members from the Ale Yarok and Holocaust Survivors parties. They claim to contain the original members of these parties. They wish to strengthen human rights, people's freedom and their privacy. Laws concerning holocaust survivors should change, giving them a decent and comfortable life. More medicine should be pumped into the healthcare system including full treatment for people with cancer and chronic diseases. The environment should be safeguarded and there should be more bicycle paths. Importance is placed on the legalization of marijuana for medical and industrial use. University should be made part of the compulsory education system and animal experimentation must stop.

Did not run last election

More information on Israeli Party Politics see: <http://israel.kieskompas.nl/page/0/thema+s/>

Major Party Leaders

Ehud Barak – Avoda (Labor)



Currently Israel's Defense Minister.

Background

Ehud Barak was born on Mishmar HaSharon, a kibbutz that his father, an immigrant from Lithuania, founded in 1932. Barak was drafted into the Israel Defense Forces in 1959 and began his distinguished military career. He was a commander of battles in the Six-Day War (1967) and the Yom Kippur War (1973) but became especially known as the leader of Special Forces units that conducted commando raids. One of these commando actions took place in 1972. With a group of soldiers, Benjamin Netanyahu among them, he stormed an airliner hijacked by Palestinian guerrillas at Lod International Airport near Tel Aviv, freeing all the hostages.

Barak served as Head of Military Intelligence, and in 1991 became Chief of Staff. In 1994 he participated in negotiations that resulted in a peace accord with Jordan. When he retired in 1995 as a lieutenant general, the army's highest rank, he was the most decorated soldier in Israeli history.

Education

Barak received a Bachelor's of Science in Physics and Mathematics from Hebrew University of Jerusalem (1968) and a Master's of Science in Economic Engineering Systems from Stanford University in California (1978).

Political career

He turned his attention to politics in the mid-1990s. Within Labor governments, he was Minister of Interior (1995) and Minister of Foreign Affairs (1995–96). He was elected to the Knesset in May 1996. In June 1997, he became head of the Labor Party. Two years later he ran for the premiership in the coalition One Israel, which included Labor, the Gesher Party and Meimad (a spin-off of the National Religious Party). Barak emphasized economic and other domestic issues, including education and health services, as well as building relations with the Palestinians, Syria and Lebanon. The withdrawal of minor candidates late in the campaign allowed a face-off between incumbent Netanyahu of the ruling Likud party and Barak. On May 17, 1999, Barak won with slightly more than 56 percent of the popular vote. At the same time, smaller parties increased their seats in the Knesset. The election results were seen as a turning away from hard-line policies pursued by Netanyahu, particularly in relation to the Palestinians.

As Prime Minister, Barak pledged to establish peace in the Middle East. In September 1999 he reactivated peace talks with Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat which led to a deal that called for the creation of a final peace accord by September 2000 as well as the transferring to Palestinian control more territory in the West Bank. In December 1999, Barak resumed peace talks with Syria after more than three years of deadlock and he also ended Israeli's 17-year presence in southern Lebanon.

Beginning in the summer of 2000, Barak faced a series of crises. In July his coalition collapsed after three parties quit, leaving him with a minority government. Later that month he narrowly won a vote of confidence in the Knesset. In September violence erupted in the West Bank and Gaza, seriously threatening the peace talks. Barak met with Arafat, but the resulting cease-fire agreement was essentially ignored. As fighting continued, Barak announced a time-out from peacemaking. The move was thought to appease the growing opposition to Barak's government, especially from Ariel Sharon, the Likud party leader. In December 2000, Barak resigned as Prime Minister and a new election was slated for February 2001. Barak ran for reelection but was criticized by many Israelis for his inability to halt the violence and for allegedly making too many concessions during the peace talks. At the polls, Israelis overwhelmingly cast their ballots for Sharon. After receiving only 37 percent of the vote, Barak announced his resignation both as Labor leader and as a member of the Knesset.

Return to politics

In 2005, Barak announced his return to Israeli politics, and ran for leadership of the Labor Party in November. However, in light of his weak poll showings, Barak dropped out of the race early and declared his support for veteran statesman Shimon Peres. After Peres lost the race to Amir Peretz and left the Labor party, Barak announced he would stay in the party, despite his shaky relationship with its newly elected leader. He declared, however, that he would not run for a spot on the Labor party's Knesset list for the March 2006 elections.

In January 2007 Barak launched a bid to recapture the leadership of the Labor party in a letter acknowledging "mistakes" and "inexperience" during his tenure as Prime Minister. In early March of 2007 a poll of Labor Party primary voters put Barak ahead of all other opponents, including current leader Amir Peretz. In the first round of voting, on 28 May 2007, he received 39% of the votes, more than his two closest rivals, but not enough to win the election. As a result, Barak faced a runoff against the second-place finisher, Ami Ayalon, on June 12, 2007, which he won by a narrow margin. As party leader, Barak would automatically be the Labor Party's candidate for Prime Minister in the next Israeli parliamentary election.

Isaac Herzog – Avoda (Labor)

Currently serving as Minister of Welfare and Social Services, Minister of the Diaspora, Society, and the Fight against Anti-Semitism.

Background and Education

Herzog is the son of former Israeli President Chaim Herzog and Aura Herzog, and the grandson of Rabbi Yitzhak HaLevi Herzog. He was born in Tel Aviv and studied law at Tel Aviv University and Cornell University. Herzog is married and has three children. His nickname is *Buji*.

Political career

Although he did not win a seat in the 1999 elections, Herzog served as Government Secretary in Ehud Barak's cabinet until 2001 when Ariel Sharon replaced Ehud Barak in a special election for Prime Minister. In 1999, he was also investigated in the 'Amutot Barak' scandal, involving allegations that the party funding law was violated, but maintained silence. The Attorney General, therefore, decided to close the case against him due to lack of evidence. From 2000-2003, he served as chairman of the Israel Anti-Drug Authority.

Herzog managed to win a seat in the 2003 election as a member of the Labor Party, and was appointed Minister of Housing and Building at his request when Labor joined Sharon's coalition government on January 10, 2005. On November 23, 2005, he resigned from his cabinet post along with the rest of the party.

Prior to the 2006 elections, Herzog won second place on Labor's list in the party's primaries. He was initially appointed Minister of Tourism in Ehud Olmert's Kadima-led coalition, but was reassigned to the Social Affairs Ministry in March 2007 after Yisrael Beytenu was awarded the Tourism Ministry following their late entry to the governing coalition. He was also appointed Minister of the Diaspora, Society and the Fight against Anti-Semitism. Herzog is chairman and Whip of the Israeli-Australian Parliamentary Association. He is also one of the few Knesset members who still serve in the Military reserves.

Ophir Pines-Paz – Avoda (Labor)

Currently a Member of Knesset.

Background and Education

Ophir Pines-Paz was born in Israel in 1961. He completed his army service with the rank of Staff Sergeant. He holds a Bachelor's Degree in International Relations from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and a Master's Degree in Public Policy from Tel Aviv University.

Political career

Pines-Paz has held two major government positions. From 2005 to 2006, as part of the Ariel Sharon government, MK Pines-Paz served as the Internal Affairs Minister. During 2006, as part of the Ehud Olmert government, he served as the Minister of Science, Culture, and Sport and was a member of the Foreign Affairs and Defense cabinet.

Following the 2006 Lebanon War, and the entry into the government of the right-wing Yisrael Beytenu, Pines-Paz quit the government coalition and focused his energy on activities in the Knesset.

Knesset activity

Pines-Paz has been a member of Knesset since 1996, when he was elected as a representative on behalf the Labor Party at the age of 34. He has since served consecutively as part of the Labor faction in the 14th, 15th, 16th and 17th Knesset sessions.

MK Pines-Paz has held numerous parliamentary positions: He is currently the Chairman of the Interior & Environment Committee, which is responsible for issues such as local government, citizenship, policing, religious affairs and environmental protection, among other things. In the past, he chaired the Constitution, Law & Justice Committee and founded and chaired the Committee on Foreign Workers. Additionally, he served as a member in various Knesset committees including the Foreign Affairs & Defense Committee, the Finance Committee, the Economic Affairs Committee and the Immigration & Absorption Committee.

Political roles

Pines-Paz held several political offices. During the Ehud Barak administration from 1999 to 2001, he served as the chairman of the parliamentary ruling coalition and as the chairman of the One Israel faction. From 2001 to 2003 he served as the General Secretary of the Labor Party.

During the internal Labor primaries for ministerial positions in 2004, Pines-Paz received the highest number of votes. During the internal Labor primaries for the current Knesset in 2007, Pines-Paz came in second, and was placed third on the Labor Party list. Pines-Paz also came in fourth during the first round of the 2008 primaries for the position of party

chairman. During the second round he transferred his support to Ehud Barak and made Barak's election victory possible.

After the 2006 elections, Pines-Paz resigned from the cabinet in November in protest the addition of the nationalist Yisrael Beytenu party to the coalition and was the only Labor Party minister to do so.

Awards

Pines-Paz is a recipient of the 2006 "Omits" award given by "Citizens for Good Governance and Social Justice", and a recipient of the 1997 "Amite" award for honest management and integrity.

Other public roles

He is a former Chairman of the Authority for Rehabilitation of Prisoners. He also served as Deputy Director-General of the Immigration and Absorption Department of the Jewish Agency.

Benjamin Netanyahu - Likud

Currently leader of the Opposition in the Knesset.

Background and Education

Benjamin Netanyahu was born in Tel Aviv in October 1949. In 1963 the Netanyahu family moved to Philadelphia in the United States. After enlisting in the Israeli military in 1967, he became a soldier in the elite special operations unit Sayeret Matkal and was on the team that rescued a hijacked jet plane at the Lod airport in 1972. He earned a Bachelor of Science in Architecture from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1975, and a Master of Science from the MIT Sloan School of Management in 1977, and has studied political science at Harvard and MIT. After his brother Jonathan died while leading the successful Entebbe raid in 1976, Netanyahu founded the Jonathan Institute, which sponsors conferences on terrorism.

Political career

Netanyahu held several ambassadorship positions before being elected to the Knesset as a Likud member in 1988. He served as Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs (1988–91) and as a Deputy Minister in Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's coalition cabinet (1991–92). In 1993 he was elected the leader of the Likud party, succeeding Yitzhak Shamir in that post. Netanyahu became known for his opposition to the 1993 Israel-PLO peace accords and the resulting Israeli withdrawals from the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The governing Labor Party entered the 1996 elections with weakened electoral appeal following Rabin's assassination in November 1995 and a series of suicide bombings by Muslim terrorists early in 1996. Netanyahu narrowly defeated Prime Minister Shimon Peres in the elections of May 29, 1996, the first in which the Prime Minister was directly elected. Netanyahu became the youngest person ever to serve as Israel's Prime Minister when he formed a government on June 18.

Premiership

Unrest dominated Netanyahu's premiership. Soon after he entered office, relations with Syria deteriorated and his decision in September 1996 to open an ancient tunnel near Al-Aksa Mosque angered Palestinians and sparked intense fighting. Netanyahu then reversed his earlier opposition to the 1993 Peace Accords and in 1997 agreed to withdraw troops from most of the West Bank town of Hebron. Pressure from within his coalition, however, led Netanyahu to announce his intention to establish a new Jewish settlement on disputed land. He also significantly lowered the amount of land that would be handed over during Israel's next phase of withdrawal from the West Bank. Violent protests, including a series of bombings, followed. In 1998 Netanyahu and Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat participated in peace talks that resulted in the Wye Memorandum, the terms of which included placing as

much as 40 percent of the West Bank under Palestinian control. The agreement was opposed by right-wing groups in Israel, and several factions in Netanyahu's government coalition quit. In 1998 the Knesset dissolved the government, and new elections were scheduled for May 1999.

Netanyahu's reelection campaign was hindered by a fragmented right wing as well as by voters' growing dislike of his inconsistent peace policies and his often abrasive style. In addition, a series of scandals plagued his administration, including his appointment in 1997 of Roni Bar-On, a Likud party functionary, as attorney general. There were allegations that Bar-On would arrange a plea bargain for a Netanyahu ally who had been charged with fraud and bribery led to a series of confidence votes in the Knesset. With his core political support undermined, Ehud Barak, leader of the Labor Party, in the 1999 elections, defeated Netanyahu.

Changes in Likud

Ariel Sharon succeeded Netanyahu as head of Likud in 1999, but Netanyahu remained a popular figure in the party. When early elections were called in 2001, Netanyahu, who had resigned his seat in the Knesset and thus was ineligible to run for Prime Minister, unsuccessfully challenged Sharon for leadership of the party. In Sharon's government, Netanyahu served as Foreign Minister (2002–03) and Finance Minister (2003–05). In 2005 Ariel Sharon left Likud and formed a centrist party, Kadima; Netanyahu was subsequently elected leader of Likud and was the party's unsuccessful prime ministerial candidate for the 2006 Knesset elections.

Gideon Sa'ar – Likud

Currently a Deputy Speaker of the Knesset and Likud faction chairman.

Background

Gideon Sa'ar was born in December 1966 in Tel Aviv. He studied Political Science at Tel Aviv University after his national service, earning a Bachelor's Degree and a Law Degree from the same institution. He worked as an aide to the Attorney General between 1995 and 1997 and then as an aide to the State Attorney until 1998.

Political career

He worked as a Secretary to the Cabinet in 1999 and again from 2001-2 after Likud's Ariel Sharon won a special election for Prime Minister. In the 2003 elections he won a seat in the Knesset on Likud's list, and was appointed Likud Parliamentary Group Chairman. He was opposed to Israel's unilateral disengagement plan and attempted to pass a bill demanding a referendum on the subject. After retaining his seat in the 2006 elections he was reappointed Group Chairman and also became a deputy Knesset speaker.

Sa'ar chairs the Knesset Committee on the Status of Women. He has proposed bills to jail employers who fire pregnant women, and bills to ban cosmetics testing on animals. In December 2008 Sa'ar won the Likud primaries for the 2009 elections, placing him second on the Likud list behind leader Benjamin Netanyahu.

Gilad Erdan – Likud

Currently the chairman of the Likud Youth.

Background and Education

Gilad Moshe Erdan was born on 30 September 1970 in Ashkelon. He was a Lieutenant in the IDF. After finishing his military service, he studied Law at Bar-Ilan University, earning an LL.B, and began work as an attorney.

Political career

Erdan acted an advisor to Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, and was director of the Department for public petitions to the Prime Minister's office between 1996 and 1998. He also worked as an advisor to Likud MK Ariel Sharon in the 1990s. Erdan was first elected to the Knesset in the 2003 elections, retaining his seat in the 2006 elections despite Likud's collapse from 40 to 12 seats. In the Likud Primaries held on December 8th 2008 he won the third spot on the list.

In the Knesset, Erdan has openly supported boosting ties between Israel and Evangelical Christians, as well as presenting bills to enforce no-smoking laws, to permanently revoke the driving licenses of serial traffic offenders and to allow the courts to revoke citizenship for "disloyalty to the state". He also serves on the Knesset's Committee on Drug Abuse.

Outside the Knesset, Erdan is chairman of *Al Sam*, an organization dealing with drug issues, and he also established the Lobby for Soldiers Missing in Action, of which he remains chairman. Erdan is a member of the Israel Broadcasting Authority's General Assembly.

Tzipi Livni – Kadima

Currently Foreign minister.

Background and Education

Born in Tel Aviv, Livni is the daughter of Eitan Livni (born in Poland) and Sara Rosenberg, both prominent former Irgun members. Tzipi Livni served as a lieutenant in the Israel Defense Forces and worked for the Mossad for nearly two years during the early 1980s, resigning in August 1983 to marry and finish her law studies. A graduate of Bar Ilan University's Faculty of Law, she has 10 years experience as a practicing lawyer specializing in public and commercial law.

Political career

Livni was first elected to the Knesset as a member of the Likud party in 1999. When Likud leader Ariel Sharon became Prime Minister in July 2001, Livni was appointed Minister of Regional Cooperation, and thereafter held various Cabinet positions including Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Minister of Immigrant Absorption and Minister of Housing and Construction. She received the Abirat Ha-Shilton ("Quality of Governance") award in 2004. On October 1, 2005, she was appointed Minister of Justice after several months acting in that position.

In Sharon's Cabinet, Livni was an avid supporter of the Prime Minister's disengagement plan and was generally considered to be among the key dovish or moderate members of the Likud party. She often mediated between various elements inside the party, and gained recognition for her efforts to achieve peace, particularly her successful efforts to have the pullout from the Gaza Strip ratified by the Knesset.

Joining Kadima

On 20 November 2005, Livni followed Sharon and Ehud Olmert into the new Kadima Party. Ahead of the 28 March elections Livni was appointed to be the new Foreign Minister, while continuing to serve as Justice Minister, as a result of the mass resignation of Likud Party members from the government.

In the selection of candidates for the March 2006 Knesset election, Livni was awarded the number three position on Kadima's list of candidates, which effectively guaranteed her election to the Knesset.

On 4 May 2006, with the swearing-in of the 31st Government, Livni became Deputy Prime Minister and retained the position of Foreign Minister. She ceased serving as Justice Minister at that time, but again held that position from November 2006 to February 2007 while still serving in her primary role as Foreign Minister.

After the March 2006 Knesset election, Livni was described as "the second most powerful politician in Israel". Livni is the second woman in Israel to hold the post of Foreign Minister, after Golda Meir. In 2007, she was included in the Time 100 Most Influential People in the

World. Forbes ranked her the 40th most powerful woman in the world in 2006, 39th in 2007, and 52nd in 2008.

Livni became the first Israeli cabinet minister to explicitly differentiate Palestinian guerrilla attacks against Israeli military targets from terrorist attacks against civilians. In 2007, she met with Palestinian Prime Minister, Salam Fayyad, to discuss "improving the lives of the Palestinian people without compromising Israel's security".

On May 2, 2007, Livni called for Olmert's resignation in the wake of the publication of the Winograd Commission's interim report. She offered herself as leader of Kadima if Olmert decides to step down and asserted her confidence in her ability to defeat him in a party election should he decline. However, her call was ignored by Olmert and her decision to stay in the Cabinet sparked some controversy.

Election as Leader

In the Kadima leadership election of 17 September 2008, Olmert decided not to stand for re-election as party leader and stated he would resign as Prime Minister following the election. Livni and Shaul Mofaz emerged as the main rivals for the leadership. Livni won the Kadima leadership election by a margin of just 431 votes (1%).

Prime Minister-designate

On 21 September 2008, Olmert formally resigned his office in a letter submitted to President Shimon Peres, and the following day Peres formally asked Livni to form a new government.

2009 election

On 24 October 2008, Shas refused to join a governing coalition, and so, a week later, elections were scheduled. Livni dropped her bid for coalition government, as she failed to get minority parties to join. The major religious parties - United Torah Judaism and Shas, Pensioner's Party and Meretz-Yachad - had major differences with Livni on the issues of social welfare and Jerusalem. Livni has asked President Shimon Peres for early elections, scheduled for February 10, 2009. Accordingly, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert will preside over a transitional government until the new Prime Minister forms the next government and is sworn into office in early 2009.

Shaul Mofaz – Kadima

Currently Israeli Minister of Transportation, a Deputy Prime Minister, and a former Minister of Defense.

Background and Education

Born in Tehran, Mofaz immigrated to Israel with his parents in 1957. Upon graduating from high school, he joined the Israel Defense Forces in 1966 and served in the Paratroop Brigade. He fought in the Six-Day War, Yom Kippur War, and the 1982 Lebanon War. In 1976, he was part of the paratroopers and Sayeret Matkal, an elite Special Forces unit in the rescue mission Operation Entebbe. Mofaz received a BA in business administration from Bar-Ilan University and attended the Command and Staff College of the US Marine Corps. He also was the Commander of the IDF Officers School.

Political career

Mofaz has worked under four different Israeli Prime Ministers. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appointed Mofaz Chief of Staff in 1998, the second Israeli of a Mizrahi background to achieve the post, which he maintained under Prime Minister Ehud Barak. In 2002, Ariel Sharon appointed him Minister of Defense. He is the current Israeli Minister of Transportation under Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

As Chief of Staff, in 1999 Mofaz prepared the IDF for intense guerrilla warfare in the territories. He fortified posts at the Gaza Strip, and due to advance urban warfare tactics and controversial use of bulldozers, he managed to keep Israel Defense Forces casualties low. However, Mofaz drew criticism for methods he had used, such as house demolitions. In 2002, Ariel Sharon controversially appointed Mofaz Defense Minister. Although Mofaz supported an agreement with the Palestinians, he was not willing to compromise in the war against militant groups such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades.

On November 21, 2005, Mofaz rejected Sharon's invitation to join his new party, Kadima, and instead announced his candidacy for the leadership of Likud. However, on December 11, 2005 he withdrew from both the leadership race and the Likud to join Kadima.

Following the elections in late March 2006, Mofaz moved from the position of Defense Minister and became the Minister of Transportation in the new Cabinet.

In August 2008, Mofaz officially entered the race to be leader of Kadima but lost in September to Tzipi Livni by a narrow margin. Following the loss, Mofaz announced that he had decided to take a break from political life to find other means in which he could support Israel from outside the political arena.

Dalia Itzik – Kadima

Currently Speaker of the Knesset.

Background and Education

Itzik was born in Jerusalem to a family of Iraqi Jews. She received a B.A. in Literature and History from the Hebrew University and a Teacher's Diploma from the Efrata Teachers Seminary in Jerusalem. She received a Law Degree from the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya.

Political career

A teacher by profession, Dalia Itzik is a former Deputy Mayor of Jerusalem in charge of Education. She was chairperson of the Legislative Panel of the Labor Party, a member of the Labor Party Central Committee, and a member of the Board of Governors of the Israel Broadcasting Authority, and the boards of the Jerusalem Theater and Gerard Behar Center.

Elected to the Knesset in 1992, she has served on the Education and Culture Committee, which she chaired from March 1995 to June 1996; the Committee for the Advancement of the Status of Women; the Science and Technology Committee; and the Internal Affairs and Environment Committee.

Itzik took office as the first female speaker of the Knesset in May 2006. She twice served as President of Israel in an interim capacity.

In the 16th Knesset, Dalia Itzik served as chairperson of the Labor-Meimad parliamentary group, as a member of the Constitution, Law and Justice Committee, on the Committee for the Advancement of the Status of Women, and on the House Committee.

Dalia Itzik has served as Minister of the Environment, Minister of Industry and Trade, and Minister of Communications. In May 2006, Dalia Itzik was selected Speaker of the Knesset.

A longtime member of the Labour Party, she joined Kadima, in 2006.

In January 2007, Israeli President Moshe Katzav took a three month leave of absence, and in July of that year, resigned the office in a plea bargain. The speaker of the Knesset stands first in the line of succession, making Itzik acting President both times. She served as the official head of State until Shimon Peres formally took over on July 15, 2007.