

# **Transcription of Conference Call with Naomi Chazan**

## **A Post-Israeli Election Analysis**

### **Wed., Feb. 11, 2009**

#### **Section 1: Naomi Chazan Introductory Talk**

I'm going to review three things. Number one is, I want to run through the election results and some of its meaning. And number two, I'll briefly touch on the coalition possibilities. And then I'll talk about some of the implications for some of the key issues related to peace and democracy in Israel. And before I begin, I have to warn everybody and I'm really sorry about this, that you have to get a pencil and paper and start doing mathematics because Israeli politics at this stage is all about mathematics. And I think it will be very difficult to understand anything I'll be saying unless you are following the numbers.

I'm aligning everybody including myself at this late hour that there are 120 seats in the Knesset and everything goes from there. So let me start off with some of the election results and the what remains. The most important thing to know at this stage is that Kadima headed by Tzipi Livni did much better than the Likud heading by Binyamin Netanyahu. Those are the two largest parties. The Kadima got 28 seats, that is 23% of the vote. And the Likud got 27 seats, that 21% of the vote. In other words, the two leading parties barely account for 44% of the vote. At twelve parties all together were elected to this Knesset and the number three party in size is Yisrael Beiteinu headed by Avigdor Lieberman.

There has a lot been said about Lieberman in the last few weeks and I have a feeling in the last 24 hours. Lieberman's key slogan during this election campaign was the following: no loyalty, no citizenship, which in other places in other times had very dire consequences for Jews as well as for indirectly Israeli Arabs in attempt to put a loyalty test for citizens in the country. From that point of view, extremely, I would say even fascist, on the one hand. On the other hand, this is a secular party that is calling for civil union, or a form of civil marriage in Israel—a curious and very worrisome phenomenon. The fourth party in size is the Labor party, which basically collapsed in these elections. It got 13 seats, or 10% of the vote. And after that we have the Shas party, the ultra-orthodox party with 11 seats. I won't go through the whole list; I'll just say that my party, Meretz also did disastrously in these elections. It went down from 5 to 3 [seats].

And the Arab parties, the three Arab parties, Hasad, Balad and what is known as the Arab Democratic List, together they got eleven seats, which is one better than the last election. So having said all that. I want to make it very clear that are some obvious patterns one has to highlight when looking at the election results. The most important is that the system is gridlocked. In other words, you have the winner of the election in a sense, which is Kadima and Tzipi Livni, probably losing the battle in the formation of the government. And I'll get back to that in a moment. But basically the system is gridlocked. And one has to understand that whatever happens it is going to be very difficult to govern in the next little while. That's the first and most obvious point.

The second and perhaps overwhelming point is that there is a probable shift to the right in Israel. Many voters moved from where they were further to the right so when they have two extreme right parties, not only Lieberman's party, but also the National Union which includes representatives from Meir Kahane's Party, ostensibly weary, I would say almost validly racist. But the movement to the right is very very clear. And if you break down those numbers, 65 seats in the Knesset, are held by the right. That is from the Likud and further to the right. And only 55 including Kadima anywhere between the center and the left. So this movement to the right, in all probability in reaction to the war in Gaza, to the on-going problem with the Hamas, and to the lack of any movement in the peace process, has demonstrated itself in the polls and that movement to the right has to be taken into account.

The third point I want to make is a repetition of the first, but is worth the re-iteration. The peace camp represented by the Labor party and Meretz, today they only account for 13% of the Knesset and therefore is in shambles. Part of the reason for that is because during the last few days a lot of voters of Labor and of Meretz had decided to vote for Kadima, for Tzipi Livni, in an election spin and she became the leader of the largest party, with the ability to form the government. So we have clear patterns, move to the right, collapse of the left and a gridlocked political system, which is the basis for any discussion. I think that will plague us until the next election. I don't see much movement on that. I hasten to add that although what I'm giving you are the figures of the official count to date. As of tomorrow, one still has to count in the votes of the soldiers, diplomats and prisoners and that may change the ballot, seat or mandate here or

there. That will not be significant in real terms, but may have some meaning because for example if Likud gains a seat then Kadima and Likud will be tied.

If Kadima gains a seat, then they will be by two seats larger than Likud and will use a little bit more leverage. There is some talk that Meretz may be able to gain a fourth seat, gain back a seat. There are also these counts, but this new count will be tomorrow. These will be minor adjustments, but we'll be much further in terms of this final picture tomorrow evening. That is the situation in terms of the election results. Having said that, I would like to move for a few minutes to discuss the prospects of the government formation or coalition formation in these circumstances and although there will be a lot of talk, during the next few days and even weeks, Tzipi Livni might be able to swing it and form a government. I don't think that is realistic at this point.

I think there are only really two governments, or two potential coalitions, that come into play in these circumstances. I will describe them because they are at least a little bit different for what its worth. The first possibility is that Netanyahu form a right-wing government without Kadima and any of the parties left of Kadima. I think by the way that the Labor and Meretz party is going to be in the opposition. Now a right wing government with 61 to 65 seats will include everything from Likud and Yisrael Beiteinu, Lieberman's party, to the two Ultra-Orthodox parties and the two right wing parties, and the National Religious party, and the National Union party as I described before. This is an extremely right wing proposition, but it is tactically free today, which precisely what Netanyahu was trying to achieve. He is trying to achieve that because he has to go to the president, all the parties will be called to the president and the president by law has to give the job of forming the government to the person who has the greatest chance of forming the government. And if Netanyahu can reach Peres the president next week, with a backing of 61 to 65 members, Peres will have no choice, but to ask him to form a government.

Parts of this government are so right wing that it is going to be change for the worse that we have not encountered to date. There is a catch and it will be difficult for Netanyahu to form such a government because it implies putting his major partner in such a coalition—Lieberman with 15 seats together with Shas, the Ultra-Orthodox party, with 11 seats. The two parties are very different in terms of their position on religion and space. It's not going to be easy for them to do that and Lieberman is playing from his perspective a justifiably very coy game. He's playing hard to get. So that's one possibility of a right wing government.

A second possibility is essentially a national unity government, which does not necessarily include Labor or Meretz, but it does include the key players of a national unity government that include Kadima. I think Tzipi Livni already understands that she cannot form this government at the moment herself, but that she can be a partner, an equal partner, I emphasize, in such a government. She wants it on a rotational basis. That means that Netanyahu will be a Prime Minister for two years, and she will be prime minister as leader of the largest party, or the party with the greatest plurality.

I anticipate that this is the preferred option of Netanyahu at the moment in order to prevent complete isolation of the government of the right, which he has to anticipate if he chooses the first option. A so-called National Unity government, and I underline "so-called" National Unity government is a little more acceptable to the international community than a right wing government. And these options are now being played out, and there will be very intensive negotiations and discussions and ups and downs over the next two weeks overseeing how these two options play out and what ultimately will happen. There are some other possibilities, but I won't go into them, because at the moment, my working assumption is that Netanyahu will form the government. My second assumption is that he only has two, only two main options, which is a right wing government or a national unity government with Kadima as an equal partner of the government and that would include Lieberman and probably Shas, but the key players will be Livni and Netanyahu in the reverse order. In other words, the possibilities here are very difficult, and if the second option plays out, the opposition will be very small indeed. Maybe one small party on the right, and labor, Meretz and Arab parties on the left. So the prospects over the coalition construction are, if I may say so, somewhat troubling.

And I will move into the third part of my introduction and that is, what does all this mean for the peace process and for a progressive Israel? Let me start with the peace process. With a right wing government, it's a non-starter. Essentially, by creating such a government, Netanyahu will be announcing that he has no intentions to pursue any negotiations or any kind of negotiated settlement with the Palestinians. With all that that implies, and in this case, probably a very serious escalation of Israel internationally. If a National Unity government is formed, then there will be some very weak signal being emitted from Israel that some kinds of talks are possible, but that's only been governments in the past.

There were several in the 1980's known that they were governments of national paralysis and therefore they are not conducive for any kind of progress on the diplomatic front.

So I would say now anybody concerned now with progress on the peace process must look for alternate strategies for dealing with the situation in Israel, and by the way, this similar situation exists also on the Palestinian side. I would with some care hint as a result that the trajectory that was set out in Oslo and then followed through with the Road Map and the Annapolis negotiations. It's just not going to work under these circumstances. And those concerned with bringing about the end of the occupation and a just settlement between Israelis and Palestinians and possibly even some agreement with Syria must look strategically in an entirely new direction. And that means much more intervention of the United States together with very clear suggestions and preferences and the Europeans can join in making it very clear what the limits of Israeli actions are and perhaps even imposing various modes that will bring about the building of national institutions on the Palestinian side and perhaps even the end of the occupation, not necessarily through bilateral negotiations and I'm advertising the need to look in different directions than the past because the political situation in Israel is not conducive to the kind of bilateral format which in any case didn't yield very much in the past few years.

So that's the key improved case in terms of the diplomatic process. I just want to add one other thought, and that is that progressive Israel is in trouble now and it's going to have to find ways of strategically re-building itself after the beating its taken at the polls here yesterday. And therefore a lot of work on grassroots level, which is guided by very innovative strategic thinking is necessary. I think many of you appreciate what I am saying because I seem to recall the mood in the United States after the re-election of George W. Bush in 2004. But I also recall what's been going on since November of 2008. And therefore similar kinds of strategies can be developed in Israel and its time to think in broader and deeper terms about how one entrenches a progressive Israel domestically as well. I'll stop here.

## **Section 2: Question & Answer**

### **How do you explain the clear shift to the right among Israeli voters and to what extent did Gaza play a role?**

Gaza played a major role, and in many respects and the election campaign was only two weeks, it lasted for only two weeks because it started in real terms after the Gaza war and was entirely influenced by the Gaza discourse. Labor, Kadima, and Likud were outworking themselves over who hit harder and whether we stopped too early or on time, should have "finished" the job which was Lieberman's and Likud's position. So there's no questions about that. That's number one. The major reason for the shift to the right is the indeterminate nature of the situation magnified by the Gaza war. The second reason is a hidden reason. The voting rate in Israel was just over 65%. In the US, that sounds good, and is a bit better than the 2006 elections in Israel, but if I tell you 10 years ago, the turnout rate was 80%, it gives you some indication of what's going on. 35% of the voters did not go to the polls yesterday and there you find a large group of frustrated, and or turned-off voters who sees absolutely no choice between the major parties and weren't about to get up in the rain or go out in the rain and vote on these circumstances. The supposed turn to the right is also a disgust of voters who disagreed with the war or are unhappy about its results and really found that there was nobody that they could really vote for in good conscience. I think the third reason is perhaps the deeper reason, and that is, as long as there is now a movement and an actual implementation of an agreement, the situation of constant waves of violence inevitably fortifies the extremists on both sides, on the Palestinian and the Israeli side. And the election results in Israel reflect the fact that non-peace is an extremist paradise.

### **Did the election in the United States and Barack Obama play any role in this election?**

In a funny kind of way mostly between Netanyahu and Tzipi Livni. Sort of each one tried to say that they were the most acceptable and could work best with Obama. "He's my friend." "No, he's my friend." That kind of thing. I do acknowledge Tzipi Livni's success yesterday, and it is a success. It was about a gap of about 10 seat two weeks ago and she succeeded in closing that gap. But many Israelis are uncomfortable with the fact that the Israel presents a hardliner position externally and they still do believe that Livni is more flexible and more acceptable to the kind of administration in Washington. I really want to hasten to

add that the revalue of intervention of any sort in the Israel elections, not a hint of it actually, were really Israeli candidates playing off, using and abusing the Obama name to serve their electoral purposes.

**Do you think there are great possibilities for President Obama to pressure Israel? What kind of pressure can he exert and what would be the relationship between sticks and carrots, so to speak, in what he could potentially do, with either Israeli Prime Minister?**

Again, I'm trying to be careful because in Israeli politics, nothing is certain until it is certain. But I really want to repeat that I really don't see a Livni-lead government under these circumstances. And one has to in all probability adjust oneself to that reality. It's going to be a Netanyahu-led government unless something really unusual happens in the next few weeks. But having said that you people are the experts. Washington is where the decision if any are going to be made, probably in consultation with key European countries and possibly with the European Union, but my starting point is that the current trajectory is a non-starter under these circumstances. I personally think that is has been for a number of years, and that it has to be replaced by a vigorous campaign on a permanent US-led settlement, which will involve unquestionably carrots and sticks, carrots and sticks implied on both sides. What I can't conceive is possible in the interim is a very clear statement on the freezing of all settlement—something Mitchell can do easily because essentially that is the essence of the Mitchell report. I can't see much more vigorous action on examining a National Unity government on the Palestinian side and also on building Palestinian institutions and fortifying them. I could conceivably begin to think in the direction of a separate in-between of ending the occupation and constructing a Palestinian State. There may have to be a re-thinking on how to deal with the settlements in a permanent settlement situation, but what is going to have happen is to develop a strategy, which is much more externally driven because of the capacity in the last couple years. But definitely in the future the possibility that there are two sides to reach an agreement bilaterally is extremely limited, if impossible. Therefore, if something is going to happen, it's going to have to be in all probability designed and imposed from outside.

**People keep suggesting that Netanyahu can become a peace-maker. Nixon going to China is the analogy. Is this in any way a realistic possibility?**

On a bilateral basis, no. Right now the conflict has been regionalized and actually since the second Lebanon war, if anybody had any doubts definitely after the Gaza war. But there is a regionalization of the solution or a need regionalize the solution. Hopefully the Arab Peace Initiative is still alive, although it's suffered a severe blow in the post Gaza War period. And therefore the Nixon analogy I think is not apt under these circumstances. One has to think more in terms of internationalizing the process and regionalizing the solution. In these circumstances, one has to find ways of overcoming the political weakness both in Israel and in Palestine, which has become a severe, if not the major impediment to an agreement.

**Could you talk about now what's happened with the Syrian track and the opportunities for a peace agreement.**

I think this is one of these interim measures that can be undertaken, and now that the United States is talking directly to Syria and they are also conceivable finding ways to converse with the Hamas as well. Again it's very difficult if one does not think regionally and looks to really separate out entirely the Syrian issue of the Israeli Palestinian issue.

**In the terms of the political parties you see in re-building a progressive agenda, what would you say about the existing left parties in terms of re-building those. Would you have to have new parties in terms of Meretz / Labor, even the Green party?**

By the way, all the green parties didn't pass the threshold. None of them. The smallest party is Balad with three [seats]. Oh, by the way, can I give you one bright insight through all this gloom and doom? The number of women in the Knesset has risen. I don't have a precise count at the moment, but by a quick computation, at least twenty, but possibly up to 24, which is much more than we've ever had. If you're looking for something good, maybe it's there. What happened to Labor and Meretz is part of this shift to the right. Although, I'm not sure I would call Labor a left party today. It has left components, but I'm not sure it is a left party. And Meretz tried to develop in these elections a coalition and try to create a new left movement in Israel and against better judgment of some members of the party, a whole new group which included a lot of leaders of Peace Now, major intellectuals and writers, several society activists, etc. And

this move, which by the way I favored entirely did not prove itself successful partly because of the indeterminate nature of Meretz's position on the Gaza war. A minority was opposed to the war from the outset, and some other members supported the right to defend ourselves against Hamas rockets and then quickly called for a cease-fire, then quickly disappeared in the public. That is something that is understandable. Those that were opposed to the war went over to Hadash. And those who supported the war actually dripped over in the direction of Kadima and Labor. The complicated position of Meretz on the war cost a lot of support and it stopped the momentum that had developed before the war, with the creation of the new alliance. And in the last few days, I would say Meretz lost half its electoral potential by people who were taken in by Tzipi Livni's plea to beat Netanyahu by voting for her. All the explanations of voting for Tzipi under these circumstances was a sure vote for Netanyahu as Prime Minister really fell on their ears, even though in all probability, that is precisely what is going to happen. But there are already beginnings of a talk about building an alliance. I've heard two different kinds of talks, in the last 24 hours. One is more in the direction of a Meretz / Labor coalition. And the other one, which I find much more interesting and much more promising is building a broad coalition / peace coalition which will include some of the Arab parties as well. I think an Arab / Jewish coalition is very crucial today politically, as well as on the level of civil society because of the intense fragility of Arab / Jewish relations with the legitimization of the kind of discourse promoted by Lieberman and people of his sorts.

**There are a group of questions that have to do with racism towards Arabs. One was, if Mayor Kahane's party was cut because of its racist agenda, how did Lieberman succeed at getting his platform legitimized?**

Well, first of all, there are some Kahane's in the National Union Party. But secondly, the question is a very good question because what has certainly happened in recent years what was absolutely unacceptable 20 years ago has gradually become legitimized. And let's not forget that one of Lieberman's schemes is to transfer Arab citizens to a Palestinian state in return for the settlements. He's not against a Palestinian state, he just wants all the settlements in Israel, and the major population of Israel / Arab citizens or what is known as Palestinian citizens of Israel to be transferred out into a Palestinian state. This is sheer and utter racism. And slowly and insidiously, this kind of language has become acceptable in Israeli public discourse. In attempts to denounce it, to alter it, to exclude it have not succeeded. And I think it an indication, and in case you haven't noticed in the whole analysis that has given. There's been little reference, unfortunately to basic values, of equality, pluralism and tolerance, and next to no discussion of ideology. This is power politics with ideological fuzziness allows for ideology of the sort that Lieberman supports and propagates.

**Can you envision an Arab party ever joining an Israeli government? And would Livni be brave enough to break the taboo and invite Arab parties to join her coalition?**

I wish she would formed a coalition, but again people keep asking about what she would do, but I'm not sure she has that freedom of movement. When Barak came in 99 elections, he beat Netanyahu in the direct elections as the Prime Minister in 1999. I was a member of Knesset, of Meretz and one of the first things we asked of him is that he include one of the Arab parties in the coalition and the answer was no. And this is some indication of how discrimination against Arab citizens of Israel has been systemic. Maybe it's the key political manifestation of this institutionalized discrimination. And to answer your question very very directly, yes, I think we have to get over that barrier. I think it's essential to do so, and I think there has to be a movement that is willing to do so as part of its platform to make it happen. Trying to even place that possibility on the table and working towards it is a major shift and will break this uniform and break this unacceptable discourse which is permeating the country.

**Do you think the discussions and supposed commitments with Israel, Egypt, the US and several European nations will actually result in the substantial reduction in the smuggling of weapons and rackets into the Gaza, particularly those in range to reach Tel Aviv, and to the extent that that could be negotiated and have an effect on the present situation in Israel.**

My answer is yes, but that may be the last legacy of the Olmert government. Don't forget that Olmert remains Prime Minister and when the new government is sworn in, and it will take about a month for the new government to form, and that's a conservative estimate. It might take more. And in the interim room, that is precisely of what Olmert is trying to do, and if he does, it at least puts any new government in Israel

in a situation in which it has to abide by agreements, otherwise it invites the wrath of the entire international community. I very much hope that such a deal is consummated in the few days, or weeks.

**Israel's electoral system seems to be structured to bring about permanent electoral instability in a fragmentation that undermines efforts to create a stable government that can deliver a peace agreement. Would you say the electoral system is one of the culprits in undermining the peace process? And is it possible that these elections particularly might spur a new round of electoral reform, such as raising the 2% electoral threshold?**

That is a very good question and shows how tired I am because I usually foam at the mouth on the topic on the first round and I didn't do that. It's a very important question. It's always easy to blame the system, as in the United States, one blames the economy for political transitions. Probably that is what's obvious is what you have now are the results of these elections which are a very clear reflection of the extent of differences of opinion within Israeli society. And as the possibility of some agreement has become more necessary because revisions within Israel have become greater which has contributed directly to instability. I sometimes say when I'm especially tired that the fractured nature of Israeli politics today is one the indirect and most profound ramifications of the on-going occupation. Having said that, the question of electoral reform is definitely on the agenda. In their speeches last night, Barak, Livni and Lieberman spoke very clearly about the need for electoral reform. My hunch is that it might be a pre-condition of Lieberman for entering government, maybe even for Livni. I, by the way, do not see this electoral reform as something that is necessarily positive. A presidential system, American style will severely handicap smaller ideological groups and minorities in Israel and their representation. It will exclude too many voices in Israeli politics. I see that as extremely problematic, but more to the point, it won't leave the flexibility in the system, which allows us to replace governments that can't govern. Some people say, "Could you imagine if we were stuck with certain Prime Ministers for a full four year term?" I think some of you know what I am talking about. You've had eight barren years in American history.

**Do you think that the Israeli public is no longer in favor of a two-state solution?**

First of all these analyses have to be taken with a grain of salt. I've emphasized over and over again in the last hour a right wing shift, but I will add that one of the ways to explain the Kadima surge in the polls, in the last week from a position of clear inferiority to doing better than the Likud is the result of the fact that many Israelis do not want to exclude a negotiated action. They wanted to leave open the possibility and this was their way of expressing it, given the political result today. So, no, I think the desire for negotiations exists for a two state solution. The belief in the ability to achieve that is a different question.

**Are there any particular domestic issues that we should be aware of in the United States that were at play in this election that could affect the peace process?**

I think everything domestically affects the peace process, the biggest one, again, is the need to fortify the progressive roots of Israel, protect the right of dissent, make sure that different voices are heard, combat any attempts to deepen racism in the country and deal with fundamental democratic issues, and obviously, the one we haven't discussed at all, is the economic crisis Israel is in now, like the United States, in an economic recession. And by the way, all of the candidates either now in the government or a National Unity government are free marketers, and that is not necessarily the type of approach that is necessary. The big defeat domestically in these elections is the defeat of the social democrats, and that is going to have to be more and more expressed by civil society organizations, who they themselves will become channels for the creation of a new progressive movement.

**What advice do you have for the pro-peace movement in the US, and is there anything else you want to say about US intervention?**

Do not give up for one minute. Every progressive Jewish voice in the peace process is essentially a voice for the survival for a sane and moral Israel. Just keep up the good work.