

February 20, 2009 (updated 26 February)

## **Interview: Prospects for a Centrist 'Grand Coalition' in Israel**

By GERALD STEINBERG AND BERNARD GWERTZMAN

**Interviewee:** Gerald Steinberg, Chairman, Political Science Department, Bar-Ilan University, Israel

**Interviewer:** Bernard Gwertzman, Consulting Editor, [Council on Foreign Relations](#)

Gerald Steinberg, who has been an adviser to the Israeli Foreign Ministry, says that with [Benjamin Netanyahu](#), the head of the Likud Party, being asked to form a coalition government, he believes that Netanyahu would strongly prefer "a broad, centrist-based coalition" with [Tzipi Livni](#) of Kadima and [Ehud Barak](#) of Labor. But he says there will be tough negotiations ahead since these two have both vowed to stay out of the Likud-led coalition. Steinberg says he, too, favors such a coalition. "That is a platform of moderation, with an emphasis on economic stability and job creation as a priority; cooperative relationship with the United States, openness towards serious negotiations for peace, all of those things which are essentially compatible with the platforms of all three major parties. That would be in Israel's best interests."

**In Israel Friday morning, President [Shimon Peres](#) asked Benjamin Netanyahu, the leader of Likud, to take the lead in trying to form a new government. Netanyahu, of course, had been prime minister in the 1990s, and is regarded as a leader of the right-wing bloc. And also today, Tzipi Livni, the leader of the Kadima party, who had received the most popular votes in the recent election, said she would not join the coalition, but I guess everything is up for negotiation, right?**

Yes it is, as it is often the case in Israel. Both Kadima and Likud got about a quarter of the 120 seats in the Knesset, which means that neither of them has a strong mandate, and that's been the situation in Israel for a number of years. Whoever is asked to form a government because he or she is seen as having the greatest chance of doing so, still has to work very hard to put together a coalition of sixty-one seats, and that probably means it has to include four or five different parties, some of whom have very different platforms and objectives. It's always been difficult, and it's just gotten more difficult.

**At this moment, if Netanyahu had his choice, what would his government look like, do you think?**

I'm guessing that he would like to have a broad, centrist-based coalition. First of all that means he gets twenty eight seats from Kadima. With his twenty- seven, he's up to fifty-five, so he would have many choices to get the extra six or more seats. But in fact, with that kind of foundation, he might be able to get at least some of the thirteen Labor seats, and that would put him way over the seventy mark.

**So he wouldn't even need any other right-wing parties.**

He wouldn't need any other right-wing, or secular, or religious, or any other parties. If he had the three centrist parties together, that would be the strongest coalition, and most Israelis favor the stability this would provide.

**Given that situation, why would Livni and also Ehud Barak, the head of the Labor party, say that they don't want to be in a coalition with him?**

First of all, remember that we're going to have negotiations, and it may turn out that they will join. I think we need to wait a week or two. These can be very, very difficult negotiations. Labor's situation is this: They've got thirteen seats. That puts them in the fourth place, behind even [Avigdor Lieberman's](#) party. Labor was once Israel's largest ruling party. Many members of the party argue that going into a coalition under Netanyahu would simply mean the end of the party completely. What they need to do, they argue, is to go into the opposition, wait for Netanyahu to fail, and then come back with a new leadership, and a stronger platform going back to traditional values, particularly in the social-economic field. We're going through a major economic crisis in Israel like the rest of the world, and they argue that Labor is in the best position as Social Democrats to come back three or four years down the line to benefit from the crisis and benefit from Netanyahu's failures. That's their argument. I don't think Ehud Barak agrees with that but he's going to have a tough time convincing other members of the party that in fact it's worth joining the Netanyahu coalition.

For Livni, it's somewhat similar. She argues that Netanyahu will fail and we don't want to be part of that failure. "If we are out of it, in fact he'll fail more quickly. A right-wing government led by Netanyahu with Lieberman as a necessary part of that coalition will not be able to last very long; it will get itself into conflicts with the United States, there will be increased pressure on Israel, and the government will not be able to manage the economy." And in the next election, they argue, Kadima under Tzipi Livni will come back and will have a larger margin of victory, and will be able to form the government.

**As far as Israel's overall interest, what do you think?**

I strongly favor a centrist-based coalition, with the three centrist parties--Likud, Kadima, and Labor--forming a foundation, and then setting up a platform with a basic open door. That is a platform of moderation, with an emphasis on economic stability and job creation as a priority; cooperative relationship with the United States, openness towards serious negotiations for peace, all of those things which are essentially compatible with the platforms of all three major parties. That would be in Israel's best interests.

**What is Likud's stand, and Netanyahu's, on negotiations with the [Palestinians](#) for a two-state solution?**

There's a lot of waffling there, but essentially Netanyahu has favored two-state negotiations. I emphasize "negotiations." Whether the end of negotiations would provide the terms Netanyahu would accept is open to question. Likud itself encompasses the center-right sector of Israel's political map. Netanyahu, despite his rhetoric, has acted in a more centrist manner. Likud broke with Kadima in 2005 on the issue of unilateral disengagement [from Gaza]. Part of that was tactical. The Likud argued that it was going to fail, and they were right. There are also some lingering ideological factors, but settlements are not the central part of their platform. The remaining pro-settlement sector in Israel includes Lieberman, whose party, Yisrael Beiteinu has fifteen seats, and a group of religious parties that constitute together on the order of eight or nine seats, and perhaps Shas, which has another nine seats. That would be a sizeable bloc that is to the right of Likud.

### **And they want to have more settlements?**

Well, there's a range of views on that as well. The hardline settlement community is down to about 200,000 voters, and those are the people who turn out for demonstrations. These are also the people who vote for parties that still highlight settlements as their primary issue. But in analyses of Israeli politics, this issues has been way overemphasized. The Israeli consensus, which is about 60-70 percent of the Jewish vote plus all of the Arab voters, does not favor expanding settlements. The Jewish consensus is largely that "we keep what we have in terms of the settlement blocs," as outlined in the agreement in 2004 between then-Prime Minister [Ariel Sharon](#) and President George Bush.

### **Please explain that.**

In this approach, the large settlement blocs with tens of thousands of residents, along the 1949 "Green Line" and near Jerusalem, will continue to be part of Israel. An agreement with the Palestine Authority could include exchange of territory, providing an equal area to a Palestinian state. As to the small settlements that are in the middle of large Palestinian population areas, the Israeli consensus is that we know those are like to come down at some point.

### **Right, and what about Jerusalem?**

Jerusalem is much more contested. But there again there is an Israeli consensus that any agreements must be ones that we can have confidence in -- we will not go back to the 1949 Armistice agreements, which promised access to holy sites, but were never implemented for Jews. Unless we have some more "realistic"-- and nobody knows what that means -- terms for agreement, the Israeli security control has to be maintained, because otherwise, Jews will be attacked and squeezed out. However, there is also consensus that in terms of autonomy and self-government, the majority-Arab neighborhoods in Jerusalem do not have to be considered part of the Israeli state. The core issues are security and access to holy sites. And nobody has come up with a workable plan for the idea of having a Palestinian capital in Jerusalem that also protects Israeli security rights, other than in very flowery language, which Israelis just don't take seriously because of the past experience.

### **So that's obviously unresolved.**

It's going to be extremely difficult to resolve. I don't know any serious Israeli thinkers who expect Jerusalem to be resolved in a period of four to five years. The key factor is the Palestinian behavior on the ground, and not pledges that are made and written into agreements that are so far from the present reality that it's impossible to imagine a realistic jump from one to the other in a short period of time.

### **What would be wrong with a right-wing government? Who would be in a right-wing government?**

The fear is obviously Lieberman. Lieberman got fifteen seats which is about 13 percent of the vote, and it's not that much larger than in previous years. He captured a few seats from Likud and a smaller parties that were considered to be too narrow or weak on these issues. In the aftermath of the Gaza war and the vicious international condemnation of Israel, Lieberman message of talking and acting tough was attractive to some additional Israeli voters. If Lieberman is in the government, there's a question of how much is he committed to his platform and how much is opportunism, or let's say electoral rhetoric. But if he's committed to the platform, that would mean much stronger limits on negotiations with the Palestinians. Lieberman has also called for a loyalty oath for Israeli Arabs, reacting to a strong radicalization of the Israeli Arabs who've become extremists and have supported  [Hamas](#) and  [Hezbollah](#) directly.

Lieberman also rejects the idea that President  [Mahmoud Abbas](#) and the remnants of  [Fatah](#) are either interested or capable of delivering on a two-state solution. Many other Israeli leaders may privately think in fact that there's no real hope for the Fatah leadership returning to power, particularly in Gaza, able to make peace with Israel and defeat Hamas, but they go along with it because of American pressure. I don't know if [outgoing Prime Minister  [Ehud](#)  [Olmert](#) and Livni really thought that there was much to be gained by negotiating with the  [Palestinian Authority](#) over the last year since the Annapolis conference in November 2007. But President Bush asked for it -- there was intense American pressure. And they'll go along with it because Obama will increase the pressure -- we don't want to fight with the Americans. But that's not Lieberman's position, and there are many Israelis who share his view. Most of them don't say it publicly. Lieberman says things publicly that others that think those thoughts don't say because of the political fallout.