

Why Not Re-Elect Netanyahu?

Nineteen years ago, when Benjamin Netanyahu first became Prime Minister of Israel, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process dominated the national elections. There were other issues of importance, but all else paled in comparison to the question of how much Israel's next leader would give up for peace, and how he would handle the situation if the Palestinians failed to reciprocate.

Two decades later the situation looks much different to voters as they head to the polls on March 17. Today most Israelis recognize that there is no peace process any more, and that efforts to conclude a viable agreement with the current Palestinian leadership are increasingly unrealistic. And so, while a leader's position regarding the peace process and the Land of Israel still matters, it is far from being the first thing voters look to when making their decision.

What seems to matter most to Israelis now is the quality of life, and the issue most impinging on their happiness is the widening gap between the cost of living and the average household income.

Yes, Netanyahu is the most well-spoken of Israel's politicians, and yes, he understands Israel's chief ally, the United States, better than any of his peers. But those are qualities more geared to foreign affairs. When it comes to what matters most in this election, many Israelis view the upper class Netanyahu as being disconnected from the every-day realities and struggles of the common people.

Supporters of Israel abroad, both Jewish and Christian, primarily focus on security threats and the peace process, but these have become secondary concerns to average Israelis. For people who only see one or a limited number of facets of Israeli life, it can seem incomprehensible that the Jewish state would fail to elect the leader most qualified to tackle those particular issues.

But Israel is a living, breathing nation that faces the same types of environmental, economic, transportation, and a host of other issues with which every other country wrestles. It is not defined solely by its borders and battles against terrorism. And Netanyahu has failed to convince ordinary Israelis that he is adept at addressing these concerns as he is at preventing the international community from imposing harmful terms of peace.

At any rate, with the peace process in such a quagmire, few believe that any prime minister, be he from the left or the right, would attempt to make far-reaching and dangerous land concessions. And if he did, his government would simply be toppled and a new one elected. Remember how quickly Ehud Barak's government fell twenty years ago, after he offered to meet most of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's demands, including the division of Jerusalem.

Conversely, it has been demonstrated that even the most right wing and conservative prime ministers can preside over the surrender of large chunks of land. Case in point is Ariel Sharon, who unilaterally pulled Israel out of Gaza in 2005.

When it comes to diplomatic issues, Netanyahu is generally accepted as being good at what he does. But for a growing number of Israelis there are more important concerns, and for them

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Netanyahu has not seemed to provide adequate answers.

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At the same time, polls also show that a majority of Israelis do not see a better or more competent alternative to Netanyahu. He leads every other candidate in the polls by double their percentages. So Netanyahu is likely to be re-elected and to remain Israel's Prime Minister following the March 17 elections for another five-year term. But he will have a lot to prove beyond demonstrating his commitment to the borders and security of the nation. However, in the long term they may still be the most important national issues, anyway.

(Condensed from an article in the February issue of the "Israel Today" news magazine.)

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