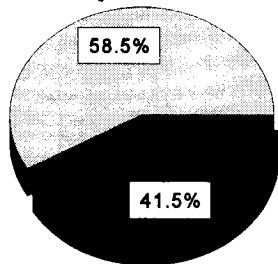


Vote for prime minister



Barak Netanyahu

Source: Israel Broadcasting Authority exit poll

TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Barak wins stunning victory

Labor Party leader Ehud Barak was overwhelmingly elected prime minister of Israel, according to exit polls cited by Israel's Channel 1 Television. [Page 3]

Clinton congratulates Barak

President Clinton called Ehud Barak to congratulate him on his victory over Benjamin Netanyahu.

In a statement released by the White House after the call, Clinton said, "The people of Israel have given the new prime minister a strong mandate." [Page 4]

Conference calls for unity

The Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations sent a letter Monday to Ehud Barak congratulating him on his victory and calling on the Labor Party leader to work toward Jewish unity.

"The unity of the people of Israel and of world Jewry with Israel must be a priority," said the letter. "It is essential" that "we strive to heal the divisions and end the strife that is so detrimental and costly."

AIPAC invites Barak to parley

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee officially invited Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak to speak to its annual policy conference that begins this weekend.

Benjamin Netanyahu was uninvited after he resigned as leader of the Likud Party. The conference became a source of tension between Barak and the pro-Israel lobby when AIPAC, citing the tradition of only having the prime minister speak to the group, earlier refused to invite the Labor Party leader.

ISRAELIS DECIDE THE FUTURE

Mini-drama plays itself out as Israeli voters hit the polls

By Avi Machlis

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Two huge banners appealing to Israelis to back Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel's elections flanked both sides of Hashomer Street, reminding voters entering the economically disadvantaged Katamon neighborhood here that they were passing into Likud territory.

Katamon residents have traditionally been staunch Likud supporters. Yet outside the voting booths at the Gonen school, a mini-drama was playing out, as activists from across the political spectrum were fighting for every last vote.

The scene in this neighborhood on election day Monday was a microcosm of Jerusalem, as voters turned out in droves to elect the country's next prime minister and Knesset.

The area is a Likud stronghold, yet a mosaic of completely different populations: secular and fervently Orthodox, new immigrants and Arabs, all living side by side in perpetual tension.

Like never before, last-minute electioneering was focused heavily on domestic issues: religious, ethnic and socioeconomic conflicts. Traditional left-right battles on peace and security were pushed aside.

"I have nothing to live off, and Netanyahu, Barak or Shas won't make a difference," said Yedidya Avrushmi, sporting a green cap of the left-wing Meretz Party, an unpopular group in this neighborhood.

"Meretz convinced me with its campaign for public housing," he said, adding that he voted for Labor leader Ehud Barak in the one-on-one race for prime minister against the incumbent Netanyahu.

While Avrushmi struggled to recruit voters to his party, David Cohen was busy distributing Shas leaflets. Cohen, a 27-year-old Sephardi yeshiva student, said his party helped the needy long before the campaign began five months ago.

"The campaign lasts four years for us.

"The minute the elections are over, we start looking at who we can help by sending them to the right aid agencies or government officials, and providing education for kids and adults," said Cohen.

The recent conviction of Shas leader Aryeh Deri, Cohen said, "has only boosted support for us."

People feel that Sephardi Jews "have been persecuted, and more activists are coming out than ever before."

In the run-up to the election, rabbis from Shas and other fervently Orthodox parties explicitly endorsed Netanyahu as prime minister, realizing their chances of joining a coalition led by Barak would be slim. Yet even with Netanyahu trailing badly in the polls up until election day, nobody was taking any chances.

"This area was always left unmanned by Labor in the past, but because Barak is ahead in the polls, there's a feeling that we have something to lose," said Benny Hochner, a 53-year-old neurobiologist and activist for One Israel, the coalition created by Barak.

"We have to be out here, even if there aren't too many people to convince," he said, sitting behind a Barak poster.

Eli Ben-Shushan, 37, a Likud activist manning his party's station, followed the same strategy: "Even though most people here vote Likud, there's plenty of work for

MIDEAST FOCUS

Abdullah meets Jewish leaders

Israel and Syria are "at the threshold of a breakthrough," Jordan's King Abdullah told a delegation of some 18 Jewish officials at a meeting Monday in Washington.

Abdullah told the officials that Syrian President Hafez Assad referred in a recent meeting to "when" Syria has peace with Israel, not "if," according to participants.

Abdullah also pledged his country's full commitment to peace with Israel and promised in the wake of Ehud Barak's election victory to "help the peace process along."

He met with U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright earlier in the day and is due at the White House on Tuesday.

Construction starts at Har Homa

Israeli construction firms on Sunday started preparations for building homes at a controversial Jewish housing project in a southeastern Jerusalem neighborhood.

Initial groundbreaking at Har Homa in March 1997 led to a nearly two-year suspension of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

Hamas head gives mixed signals

The spiritual leader of Hamas suggested for the first time that he might recognize Israel's right to exist. "Let's end this conflict by declaring a temporary cease-fire," Sheik Ahmed Yassin said in an interview published Monday in USA Today.

But Yassin did not completely change his militant rhetoric, saying in the same interview, "It makes no difference to us who wins the Israeli elections. They are all our enemies, just two sides of the same coin."

Yassin adopted a similar tone during an interview the same day with the Reuters news agency, saying continued terror attacks would not "depend on whether Likud or Labor are in power."



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us," he said. "There are a lot of immigrants and elderly people who don't quite know how to vote, so we help them out."

Grigory and Clara Rimmel, an elderly immigrant couple from Kazakhstan, a former Soviet republic, knew how to vote — and they did not need any help.

"We voted Barak and Yisrael Ba' Aliyah," said Clara Rimmel, referring to her votes for prime minister and the Knesset, respectively. "Barak wants peace, and he is more intelligent and trustworthy than Netanyahu. We also think he will be good for the immigrants."

About a mile away, in the Arab village of Beit Safafa, the atmosphere was completely different. Although many people in this village of 8,000 have Israeli identity cards and vote, there was virtually no electioneering in front of the local school except for a lone Barak poster.

The poster's Arabic slogan — "A State for Everyone" — was different than Barak's Hebrew posters, which spoke about Israel wanting a change.

"We think that if Barak wins, the Arabs will have more power in the Knesset like during Rabin's tenure," said Naim Alayan, who voted for Barak for prime minister and the Arab Democratic Party for the Knesset.

Barak "will have to address our needs on land, education, job opportunities, equality and the peace process."

Over in the fervently Orthodox neighborhood of Geula, the side streets were piled ankle deep in election pamphlets, even though support for Netanyahu was almost absolute. There was not a Barak poster in sight.

Most of the haredim ignored the signs posted by extreme anti-Zionist Orthodox groups, urging devout Jews to boycott the "Zionist" elections.

Upon their rabbis' orders, they turned out in droves to vote for a fervently Orthodox party for Knesset and Netanyahu to lead the country.

Just to make sure, a car ploughed through the midday traffic, its loudspeaker blaring: "Jews, vote! All of the left and the Arabs are voting massively! You must come out and vote!"

Many of the comments on the street here echoed the campaign poster slogans, warning of the dangers to yeshiva life if a left-wing government comes to power.

Yitzhak, an 18-year-old yeshiva student, said he voted for Netanyahu and United Torah Judaism.

"All of the left is against us," he said. "They want to disrupt our way of life, and they do not want this to be a Jewish state."

Many yeshiva students have firm views on the peace process as well. "Bibi is for keeping the Land of Israel intact and keeping Judaism intact," Aharon, a 21-year-old yeshiva student, said, using Netanyahu's nickname.

"If Barak wins, it's a victory for Arafat, and it is not too different than when the Nazis came to power."

Such extreme language has become commonplace in Israeli public discourse over the past few years, especially as the religious-secular conflict has emerged as a key issue.

Not surprisingly, the battle for pluralism in Israel being waged by Conservative and Reform Jews played a part in the decision of some voters.

In the largely liberal neighborhood of Emek Refaim, for example, where the cafes were full and the streets quiet, some voters at the Carmeli school were influenced by the pluralism issue.

"On the real practical issues of security, there was not much of a difference between Labor and Likud," said Jeremy Kraff, 36, a Conservative Jew who immigrated from Chicago three years ago and voted for Barak and Meretz.

"But I felt that I could make a difference if I voted for a party that stood for democratic rights, freedom of religion and freedom of expression."

Whatever the constellation of the next government, few voters have illusions that unity will prevail anytime soon.

As the warring parties fought it out in front of the Gonen school in Katamon, one passerby shook his head in despair.

"Nothing," he said sadly, watching the political bickering around him, "has changed here in 40 years." □

JEWISH WORLD

Poll: Israel vital to U.S. interests

Some 86 percent of Americans said Israel is vital to U.S. interests, according to a Gallup Poll conducted May 7 to 9.

Of those polled, 42 percent said they want Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu re-elected while 31 percent would like to see someone new elected.

The poll of 1,025 U.S. citizens has a margin of error of 3 percent.

A smaller sampling of 501 Americans with a 5 percent margin of error showed that support for a Palestinian state remains unchanged at 53 percent since the Israelis and Palestinians signed the Oslo peace accords in 1993.

First lady may visit Israel

The White House is exploring the idea of a late June visit to Israel by first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton and the Clintons' daughter, Chelsea.

The first lady, who skipped Israel on a recent Middle East visit, promised to visit after the Israeli elections.

Chapel set up at Auschwitz

A radical Catholic activist consecrated a wooden hut as a chapel Sunday near the former Auschwitz death camp to protest government plans for removing hundreds of crosses from the site.

Church officials refused to approve the chapel put up by Kazimierz Switon, the militant who initiated the cross-planting campaign last August.

The Polish government recently passed a law that will enable it to remove the crosses.

Germany plans hate-site initiative

German police are developing a search engine that will help them find those responsible for creating illegal Internet sites, including those spreading neo-Nazi propaganda, a German government official said Monday.

Speaking at a conference on Internet security in Bonn, the official gave no indication when the engine would start functioning.

War criminal expelled from U.S.

A member of a Nazi-sponsored unit that murdered thousands of Jews and others during the war was expelled permanently from the United States last week.

Kazys Ciurinskas, 81, who lived in Crown Point, Ind., left the country May 12 by plane from Chicago on his way to Lithuania, the Justice Department announced.

In mid-April, an immigration judge in Chicago ordered Ciurinskas removed from this country after he admitted participating in wartime atrocities.

ISRAELIS VOTE FOR THE FUTURE

Israelis vote for dramatic change as they elect a new prime minister

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israelis voted for dramatic change this week as they elected a new prime minister and a very different Knesset.

Ehud Barak, a former army chief of staff, was overwhelmingly elected the new prime minister of Israel, returning the Labor Party to power.

Barak received 58.5 percent of the vote to 41.5 percent for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, according to a poll by Israel's Channel 1 Television.

"I'm happy," Barak, known as a man of few words, said in Beersheba shortly after the polls closed.

In his concession speech 30 minutes after the polls closed, Netanyahu stunned his supporters by resigning as head of the Likud Party.

In separate elections for the Knesset, Israelis also sent a strong message that they wanted change. The composition of the newly elected 15th Knesset may enable Barak to forge a governing coalition based on centrist and leftist parties.

The breakdown of the Knesset seats is not yet certain. But exit polls cited the following preliminary results:

- One Israel, the Labor Party coalition, will have between 29 and 33 seats, compared with Labor's 34 in the outgoing Knesset.
- Likud will have 18 or 19 seats, a drop of 13 or 14 seats from the outgoing Knesset;
- Shas, the fervently Orthodox party, is poised to increase its Knesset representation from 10 seats to 14 or 15;
- The Meretz Party, which has nine seats in the outgoing Knesset, will have nine or 10;
- Shinui, a new party that says all fervently Orthodox parties should be kept out of the next government, will have six seats in the new Knesset;
- The Center Party, the new grouping headed by Yitzhak Mordechai, who dropped out of the race for prime minister a day before elections, will have five or six seats;
- Yisrael Ba'Aliyah, the immigrants rights party headed by Natan Sharansky, was estimated to have won six or seven seats. It has seven in the outgoing Knesset;
- The Arab parties together will have six or seven seats;
- The National Religious Party will have five or six seats, compared to nine in the outgoing Knesset; and
- The Pnina Rosenblum Party, named for its founder, a cosmetics magnate, will get two seats.

According to Channel 1's exit poll, the combined seats of One Israel, the Center Party, Yisrael Ba'Aliyah, Shinui, Meretz and Pnina Rosenblum — 61 in all — would enable Barak to create a coalition that excludes the religious parties.

Given the dimensions of his election defeat, it was not long before Netanyahu appeared before the cameras to acknowledge the voters' decision.

To cries of disbelief from his supporters, Netanyahu resigned as the Likud leader when he conceded the election.

"I have a great deal still to contribute to our state," he said. "But the time has come for me to be with my family and to take some time to decide my future."

He also adopted a conciliatory note in his speech, saying that the "tempest of the elections is passing. We have to quiet down. We have to unify."

In the wake of Netanyahu's announcement, Likud officials said it is time to revitalize the party.

"This is a very sad day for the national camp," said outgoing Communications Minister Limor Livnat. "We must rehabilitate the Likud movement at the head of the national camp, to call on all members to come home."

The election results closed a five-month campaign that had been rife with social and ethnic tensions — between religious and secular Jews, and Israelis of Sephardi background and Russian immigrants. □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES**After election dust settles, U.S. will push peace process forward***By Matthew Dorf*

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The Clinton administration has a simple message for Israelis and Palestinians: The peace process must move forward without delay.

As soon as Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak forms his coalition, the State Department plans to execute a Middle East plan that has been carefully crafted during the last five months of stalemate, since Israel began its election campaign.

Now that Barak has defeated Benjamin Netanyahu, U.S. officials believe there is a better chance of serious negotiations.

"I will continue to work energetically for a just, lasting and comprehensive peace that strengthens Israel's security," President Clinton said in a statement released by the White House moments after he congratulated Barak on his victory in a telephone call.

Clinton, who said "the people of Israel have given the new prime minister a strong mandate," called Barak to "reaffirm our nation's steadfast support for Israel and its people."

Clinton also spoke to Netanyahu by phone to "thank him for his dedicated service to Israel."

Observers expect relations between Washington and Jerusalem to improve from what has come to be known as Clinton's policy of "snub diplomacy." Clinton, who had repeatedly refused to meet with Netanyahu, saw Arafat on two occasions and met with top figures from Israel's Labor and center parties.

Barak, who enjoys good relations with the Pentagon from his days as the Israeli army chief of staff, has also developed solid ties with the White House during meetings with top administration officials and Clinton, according to an administration official.

The Clinton administration, whose preference for Barak was no secret, made it clear even before the election that it wanted to see progress on the political front.

"Whether in the Balkans or the Middle East, America is on the side of those who are committed to peace, to uphold law and to judge others not on the basis of who they are but on how they act and whether they respect the rights of others," Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said recently.

With this in mind, the next few months will see the latest in a series of opportunities in the peace process, U.S. officials say.

The administration's plan includes:

- Immediate calls for full implementation of the Wye accord;
- Direct negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians without U.S. mediation;
- Opening final-status talks with a goal of completing an agreement in one year;
- A three-way summit within six months hosted by President Clinton; and
- A new push with Lebanon and Syria to start direct talks with Israel.

"There is no acceptable alternative to the pursuit of peace," said Dennis Ross, the chief U.S. Middle East negotiator.

The administration's push comes at a critical time for Middle East peace. The Palestinians and Israelis missed a deadline earlier this month to resolve the "final status" of the most sensitive issues, including Palestinian statehood, Jerusalem, borders and Palestinian

refugees. Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat backed down from threats to unilaterally declare statehood only after the European Union promised to support such a declaration if a negotiated solution is not found.

Clinton believes that the path to peace lies in the pages of last October's Wye accord, U.S. officials said. The agreement produced a 12-week timetable that married Palestinian steps to crack down on terrorism with Israeli redeployments from the West Bank.

The Palestinians agreed, among other things, to clamp down on terrorists, seize illegal weapons, move to stop incitement and amend the Palestinian Covenant, which called for Israel's destruction. In exchange, Israel agreed to withdraw from 13 percent of the West Bank in three stages and open a safe-passage route for Palestinians traveling between the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Implementation of the accord froze after the first four weeks.

"On the Palestinian side, we have seen serious efforts to prevent terror strikes, to renounce the Palestinian covenant and to avoid a unilateral declaration of statehood," Albright said recently.

"On the Israeli side, implementation has stalled," she said.

According to U.S. officials, the White House wants to restart the time line of the Wye accord shortly after Barak forms a new government and his Cabinet is in place. Observers expect Ross to travel to the region as early as next month to work toward this goal.

At the same time that the sides are implementing their past obligations, the United States wants the Israelis and Palestinians to engage in final-status negotiations with the "objective" of completing them within one year, Albright said.

U.S. officials further hope that the Palestinians and Israelis will begin negotiating with each other without U.S. mediation.

Since the 1997 Hebron Agreement, which transferred rule over most of the West Bank town to the Palestinians, the two sides have been unable to conduct serious policy talks without help from U.S. officials. This has been a major source of concern for State Department officials, who have had to step in to resolve the most basic issues, officials said.

Ross recalled an incident last year when Israel and the Palestinian Authority immediately turned to him to resolve a "relatively minor" dispute over a road in Gaza. Both sides urgently called Ross in Washington, who said he "had to step in."

"They should have been able to solve this themselves," said Ross, who negotiated a successful compromise.

But during stalemates, the sides "lose the capacity to resolve differences," he said.

But even if the two sides begin direct talks, U.S. officials have no illusions that the process will be easy.

"Negotiations will always take longer than most people think," even when the Israelis and Palestinians have the strongest relationship and sense of partnership, Ross said.

This is an "existential conflict" and both sides are not going to rush, he said, because there is no room for mistakes.

"They need to satisfy themselves that they are not giving up too much."

And that's why the U.S. assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, Martin Indyk, continues to repeat Clinton's promise made to Yitzhak Rabin before and during the signing of the first Israeli-Palestinian peace accord.

"It's Israel that has to make the tangible concessions. And if the government of Israel takes risks for peace, our role is to minimize those risks," he said. □