

Waltzing Among the Rockets

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The cover of the January 15-22 issue of *Time Out Tel Aviv*--a free weekly rundown of culture, dining, and night life--offers a juxtaposition at once incongruous and in keeping with the nation's mood and the harsh logic of its situation.

Dominating the cover is a drawing of three combat-equipped soldiers, machine guns at the ready, illuminated by a fireball in the night sky, as they warily approach an ominous, seemingly deserted building. The drawing calls attention to the feature story, "Waltz with Hamas," an allusion to *Waltz with Bashir*, a Golden Globe-winning Israeli animated documentary that deals with the anxiety and trauma generated among soldiers by Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon. The magazine cover touts one other article: "The best soup in Tel Aviv, including recipes!"

And so it goes, throughout the country: War and affluence casually coexist. Even as serious threats loom, the pleasures of dining out and of preparing gourmet dishes at home beckon in this nation awash with books, music, film, theater, dance, painting, sculpture, professional sports, bars and restaurants, cafés and nightclubs.

What seems strangely subdued is discussion of the upcoming elections. Less than a week before the February 10 vote for a new parliament and prime minister, a wide variety of the Israelis I've talked to--from cab drivers to professors and lawyers, management consultants to dentists, journalists to national security officials, city residents to kibbutzniks--had not yet decided for whom they would vote and reported that many of their friends and acquaintances hadn't either.

Yet the race is close. The most recent polls indicate that opposition leader and former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu's conservative Likud party will take 26 to 27 seats in the 120-seat Knesset; foreign minister Tzipi Livni's centrist Kadima party will win 23 seats; a surging Israel Our Home, a fiercely nationalist party led by Knesset member and former Netanyahu chief of staff Avigdor Lieberman, will take a stunning 17 to 19 seats; and minister of defense and former prime minister Ehud Barak's left-liberal Labor party, buoyed by the success of Operation Cast Lead in Gaza, is projected to win 15 to 17 seats.

Although, with only four days to go before the election, more than 15 percent of Israelis tell pollsters they are undecided, it remains likely that when the dust settles, the right-wing bloc, which includes Likud, Israel Our Home, and the religious parties, will have won a majority of

seats. In Israel's parliamentary system, this means that even if Kadima were to edge out Likud in the voting, President Shimon Peres would still be obliged to invite Netanyahu, the head of the largest right-wing party, to form a government.

Whoever wins will inherit major challenges. Israel remains surrounded on three sides by enemies. To the north in Lebanon, Hezbollah, since the Lebanon war in the summer of 2006, has rearmed and regrouped. To the northeast, Syria, which continues to support Hezbollah and Hamas, has deployed missiles that can reach Tel Aviv. To the east, in the West Bank, Hamas continues to plot terrorist attacks; were the Israel Defense Forces and the Israel Security Agency to reduce their continuous operations beyond the Green Line, few doubt that Hamas rockets would soon rain down on Ben Gurion Airport and downtown Tel Aviv. To the southwest, in Gaza, Hamas is down but not destroyed; unless the flow of weapons through Egypt is cut off, the next substantial Israeli military operation in Gaza will occur sooner rather than later. And behind the scenes, on every front, Iran trains and finances Israel's enemies.

The economy, moreover, while in better shape than many, still has suffered a slowdown, and may be headed for recession. The system of public education has long been underfunded and poorly run. Tel Aviv University, Israel's largest, has been grappling with a severe financial crisis and a dispirited faculty. And Israel's Muslim-Arab minority, around 20 percent of the citizenry, lags behind in all indicators of social and economic well-being and is increasingly alienated from the state.

On the life and death questions of national security there is relatively little disagreement among citizens, at least among the large swath of Likud, Kadima, and Labor voters who form the expanded center of Israeli politics. They share an anger at the Palestinians not merely because of Hamas's attacks on southern Israel--approximately 7,000 rockets and missiles have been indiscriminately launched at civilian targets since Israel withdrew from Gaza in the summer of 2005--but because of the failure year after year of the Palestinian people to choose peace, to concentrate on developing their own social, political, and economic institutions instead of supporting Hamas's quest to destroy Israel. And so this broad center has concluded that Israelis and Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza must find a way, neighbors though they be, to live separate lives.

All three candidates for prime minister hinted at this convergence in addresses to the ninth annual Herzliya Conference on National Security, held here February 2-4. But the candidates' distinctive emphases were also on display.

On Monday, Livni insisted on the need to end Hamas's rule in Gaza, but stressed that it is incumbent on Israel to devise a peace plan now to end the conflict with the Palestinians or have one imposed on it.

On Tuesday, Barak underscored the achievements of the Gaza operation, Israel's determination to respond just as forcefully to further rockets from Gaza, and the need to find a solution to the conflict with the Palestinians within the context of a regional initiative that includes Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan.

And on Wednesday, Netanyahu, declaring his intention if elected to form a broad national unity government, identified Iran as the chief threat to Israel's national security, called for economic and infrastructure development in the West Bank as a prerequisite to achieving a political agreement with Palestinians, warned that Israel was yet to feel the worst shocks of the worldwide economic crisis, and promised to focus on improving Israeli education.

The major difference between the candidates went unaddressed at Herzliya. It concerns the future of Israeli settlements, the towns and cities built and populated by Israel in the territories it gained control over in 1967 in the Six Day War. While he almost certainly would not build new settlements, Netanyahu remains unlikely, without pressure from the United States, to freeze the natural growth of existing settlements. In contrast, both Livni and Barak would probably impose a freeze on all new building beyond the Green Line. Livni and Barak recognize, however, along with Netanyahu, that the settlements are far from the fundamental obstacle to peace with the Palestinians.

Indeed, the journalists, political analysts, and current and former national security officials to whom I spoke were in striking agreement that Livni and Barak as well as Netanyahu all see that the fundamental obstacle to progress in resolving the conflict with the Palestinians is Iran. Indeed, the case for Iran's centrality is convincing.

Whether the goal is to craft principles for a political agreement between Israel and the Palestinians or to build Palestinian social, economic, and political institutions from the ground up, no substantial progress can be made until Hamas, in Gaza and the West Bank, is destroyed. This is because no political agreement worth the paper it is written on, and no economic development that stands a chance of improving the lives of substantial numbers of Palestinians, is possible while Israel maintains roadblocks throughout the West Bank and its army and internal security service conduct daily operations to ferret out and eliminate Hamas terrorist cells. Yet so long as Iran pumps money and weapons into Hamas's hands, Israel will have no choice but to maintain the roadblocks and continue daily military operations beyond the Green Line.

In addition, so long as Iran funds Hezbollah in Lebanon and maintains Syria as a puppet of its Islamic Revolution, Israel must be ready to defend itself on several fronts. And so long as Iran's Islamic extremist leaders pursue nuclear weapons--which by most accounts they could have within a year--Israel must contemplate dramatic military measures vital to its national security that, even in the best case, would massively destabilize the international order.

Much as they would prefer simply to enjoy the abundance that freedom and affluence have brought them, Israelis are prepared for war. It is important for Middle East envoy George Mitchell, Secretary of State Clinton, and President Obama to understand this. Precisely because it wants the United States to be a force for good in the region, the Obama administration must also recognize that Iran will have to be persuaded or compelled to cease its export of Islamic extremism preaching destruction to Israel and death to the West. And, in the interests not only of regional peace but also the stability of the international order, the Obama administration must seek to stop Iran from providing to both the Sunni and Shiite jihadists it sponsors the weapons with which they seek to fulfill their malevolent religious obligations.

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