

25 February 1999

The Israeli Elections

Speakers: Mr. Danny Ben-Simon, Correspondent, *Ha'aretz* Newspaper; Prof. Said Zeedani, Al-Quds University, Jerusalem

Participants: HE Stanislas de Laboulaye, French Consul General, French Consulate; Mr. Willemijn van Haafteen, Netherlands Representative Office; Mr. Daniel Delacambre, Cultural Service, French Consulate; Mr. Walid Assali, Lawyer; Ms. Julie Trottier, Researcher; Ms. Latitia Brucaille, Professor; Dr. Mustafa Abu Sway, Professor, Al-Quds University; Dr. Mohammed Jadallah, Physician; Mr. Mathias Buhbe, FES; Rachel Beer, US Consulate; Mr. Richard Clarke, Student; Mr. Michael Eichenwald; Ms. Nina Sovich; Mr. Hamed Qawaseh, Student; Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi, Head of PASSIA; Ms. Deniz Altayli, PASSIA; Ms. Sawsan Baghdadi, PASSIA.

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: Meetings such as the one being held today are designed to allow the participants to put several ideas on the table and try to better understand what is going on. The major question today is what do we really know and think about the upcoming Israeli elections, from both an Israeli and a Palestinian perspective? To provide, at least partly, an answer to this question we have here today well-known Israeli journalist, Danny Ben-Simon. I was introduced to Mr. Ben-Simon by a colleague, a professor at Reading University, who told me that he had exposed several scandals and 'ups and downs' in Israel. I am not familiar with his politics or his position, but I welcome him to PASSIA as a friend and am eager to hear his ideas and to learn more about Israeli politics, especially in connection with the forthcoming elections.

After listening to Mr. Ben-Simon we will hear from Professor Said Zeedani, a philosopher and the former Dean of the Arts Department at Birzeit University who is currently teaching at Al-Quds University and who has been a part of PASSIA's activities for some time. Professor Zeedani will give us a Palestinian perspective on the issue of the elections.

Mr. Danny Ben-Simon: I would like to stress that this is not intended to be an academic lecture but rather an opportunity for me to make a series of remarks about the Israeli elections the way I see them. Prior to writing for *Ha'aretz*, I followed Israeli politics very closely whilst working for the defunct *Davar*, which was linked to the Labor Party and which 'passed away' two weeks before the 1996 elections. Like most of my colleagues, I thought that Peres would win and that Bibi would lose; upon realizing that I had misled my readers, I went into seclusion for an entire six months to write a book called *The Other Israel*. I should perhaps point out that not only journalists, but also most observers and Israeli elites read the Israeli society incorrectly prior to the elections.

Once I had finished the book and started working with *Ha'aretz*, I decided that instead of covering politics through politicians, I would go somewhere different each week and talk directly to the people in a bid to improve my understanding of Israeli politics. After a while, I came to the conclusion that we – politicians included – know less than the average person and the people who made Netanyahu's victory possible. We never wrote about people in developing towns, the Orientals, nor the Ultra-Orthodox and the newcomers from the Soviet Union – the ones who made Netanyahu's victory possible – which is why I made up my mind to go and meet them in order to understand how they think. As far as I am concerned, they are still the key factor in understanding Israeli politics today and just as they made Netanyahu's victory possible, they could also serve as the key to his defeat.

It is important to understand that the people who voted for Netanyahu did so not because of his views on the Middle East or his political agenda, but because they disliked both Peres and Rabin and were against being led to a 'New Middle East'. It is not that they were against the peace process, only the 'way' to peace. The same people, I believe, are the key to understanding why Netanyahu is not doing well and the reason why I would not bet on him winning on 17 May. Netanyahu, the one person who read Israeli society better than anyone else in 1996 when he went to see these marginal groups and fermented the anger against the State, against the elite, against Shimon Peres, has over the last three years lost touch with his supporters, for reasons that I will go into later on.

The vast majority of Israelis, by now, have come to terms with the idea that the continuation of the peace process is inevitable. The question is who will carry it out, speak to the Arabs, and receive the mandate to shape the new face of Israel? The Left has a problem as it is perceived as an 'Arab lover', as a secular force, as a political force that cannot be trusted to represent Israel 'post-peace', at least from the perspective of the religious, and particularly the Ultra-Orthodox, the newcomers from Russia, and the Orientals. The issue of peace *per se* is no longer an issue, and people are far more concerned with how peace will be cemented and the price that will have to be paid.

The reason why I said that Netanyahu is not doing well is that he is trying to run his campaign along the same lines of his campaign of 1996: I am tough on the Palestinians, I am tough on the international community, the Orient House is out of bounds for Foreign Ministers, etc. The same people who voted for him can no longer understand him, the 'phase of suspicion' having come to an end. People want to hear about the economy, about society, about who will solve the numerous internal battles among Israelis. I would say that in these elections, the issue of peace with the Palestinians ranks maybe second or third to the internal problems among Jews, especially the secular-religious issue, in the list of people's priorities. The issues of Jerusalem, the 1967 borders, and the Golan Heights will not be as prominent as the internal issue because there is now a consensus regarding the continuation of the peace process and the fact that some kind of price will have to be paid. The majority of Israelis are already thinking about what will happen after the establishment of a Palestinian state and the pullout from the Golan Heights: What will be the face or the character of Israel? Can we as Israelis live together in times of peace? Can we hold things together in the absence of the external threats of the past? These are the questions with which the vast majority of Israelis are most concerned.

In a poll conducted two months ago, 80 or 82 percent of those polled named the Ultra-Orthodox-Secular issue as the most crucial current issue. The Palestinian issue came about fifth in the list, not because Israelis do not care about it but because they have taken it for granted that the new Prime Minister, whoever he is, will continue with the peace process. Also interesting is the fact that according to the polls, this one included, there is now greater acceptance of the idea of a Palestinian state, with the majority of Israelis now believing that its establishment is inevitable.

Israelis today are far more inward looking than they were in the past and are giving a great deal of consideration to the question, "Now that we are more mature and have less enemies, isn't it time that we got on with answering the big question, i.e., Can we live together as Israelis?" Worthy of note in this respect is the fact that more and more secular Israelis are saying that as well as a Palestinian state, they would like to see some form of autonomy for the Ultra-Orthodox. In this respect, the recent demonstrations demonstrated what is waiting around the corner after the elections.

The concern over the future of Israeli society is reflected in the emergence of so many new parties, most of which are stressing the identity, or ethnic issue, and in the fact that there are now three different Russian parties. I went to Ashdod just a few weeks ago for the elections and was amazed to discover that six members of the largest and most prominent party in Ashdod, the Russian Party, neither speak nor understand Hebrew! The founders of Israel are gone, and already we notice that in most local elections in the big cities in Israel, the Likud and Labor have almost vanished whilst new 'identity' parties – the Russians, the Orientals and others – are emerging.

I expect this trend to continue with the upcoming elections, and I would imagine that by 17 May, the formation of a coalition with the old parties would be impossible. I do not envisage the Likud winning more than 18 seats in the Knesset, Labor more than 25 and the Center party more than 15, which means that the three big parties will not have a majority in the Knesset. In a way, we are heading toward a total split of the political spectrum, not over the issue of peace, but over internal issues. We currently have somewhere in the region of 55 parties running in the elections, and in light of the fact that it is unlikely that there will be a majority to form a new coalition, it would appear that even if Netanyahu were to win, he would have to form a unity government with Barak and Mordechai.

There are two reasons why the forming of a unity government is inevitable, namely, the need to bring Israelis together and the need to make it easier to deal with the big issues, including the final status issues. One thing Israelis learned from Rabin's assassination is that you cannot continue a peace process in the absence of a consensus, especially if you are from the left wing.

The tragedy in Israel is that although the Left wants to make peace, it does not really have the legitimacy to do so, whilst the Right, which has the legitimacy, does not appear to rate the importance of peace very highly. It seems to me that the split in voting will make the task of forming a government impossible. This is on the political level; on the ideological level, it appears that although Netanyahu, Barak and Mordechai do not like one another, the ideological differences are minimal.

Although this campaign started with the suspension of the Wye Plantation Memorandum, which really precipitated the downfall of Netanyahu's government, most of the issues being debated today in the Israeli press are connected to internal problems, it having been taken for granted that the 'big issues' will be dealt with when necessary, regardless of who is elected. I think that Mordechai has a fair chance of winning the elections because of his message of bringing Israelis together and the fact that he is regarded as a conciliator. Barak, on the other hand, is unable to win over the marginal groups that I spoke about, and it is becoming abundantly clear that without speaking the language of the 'new Israelis', who are now the new majority of Israel, one does not stand a chance of winning their support. It is easier for those disappointed with Netanyahu's performance to move to Mordechai who has played the middleman and who is for the peace process.

It is important to note that Shas was the party that put pressure on Netanyahu to sign the Wye Plantation Memorandum, which means that one can be Ultra-Orthodox and still be for the peace process. Nevertheless, most Ultra-Orthodox will never vote for the candidate on the left, not because he is ready to give in, but because of his secular character, which is why Mordechai is an option. It is an open game for the time being, but it seems to me that anybody who can promote himself as a conciliator, somebody who will carry on with the peace process and make peace between the Jews will stand a good chance of winning. Over the past few months, both Netanyahu and Barak have been behaving in a manner that indicates that they would like to see war rather than peace amongst Jews, which is yet another reason why I think that Mordechai stands a pretty good chance, in spite of being a 'late starter'. Unlike the others, he goes to the periphery and speaks to the 'new Israelis', and then, of course, one should not forget that he has a very good relationship with the Palestinians and with the Arab neighbors, which will undoubtedly win him the support of many Israelis.

Professor Said Zeedani: I do not disagree with the general direction of my colleague's presentation or with his conclusions, but I will try to present a different focus.

Just as the Labor-led government in Spring 1996 suspended the implementation of the Hebron component of the Oslo II Accord, so the Likud Netanyahu-led government in Winter-Spring 1999 suspended the implementation of the Wye River Memorandum, which means that in both cases, the controversial peace process was held hostage to the pending general elections and to internal Israeli politics. This confirms that the peace process in Israel is not a bipartisan issue; there is a lack of consensus when it comes to the peace process, although this is not always apparent in the conduct of the Likud Party.

Something else worth remembering is that for the past 20 years or even longer, the only exception being in 1981, those prime ministers who initiated early elections lost them: Rabin in 1977, Shamir in 1992, and Peres in 1996. The only thing that saved Begin from losing the elections in 1981 was the bombing of the Iraqi nuclear reactor. What, then, will Netanyahu do in order to save his neck in these elections, it

being clear that initiating early elections does not appear to be in the best interests of those who initiate them, unless there is an overriding external factor?

It is my belief that there five different things will determine the results of the next elections:

- the secular-religious rift or divide in Israeli society - State versus religion;
- the ethnic divide, and here we should not forget the one million Arabs inside Israel;
- social-economic issues and the fact that we have eight percent unemployment and a growth rate of only 1.6 percent;
- the peace process;
- the direct election of the Prime Minister versus the elections for the parties and for Knesset members.

These considerations or factors are inter-related in many interesting ways. The interesting question is as follows: What factor/s will take precedence over the others, and therefore should be ranked higher for the purpose of determining the results of the next elections?

1. The social-economic issues: One thing we have to remember here is the gap in Israel between the wealthy and the disadvantaged, which is wider than in any other country and similar only to that existing in the United States. The widening of this gap does not help the Left unless there is an acute economic crisis, which is not the case these days, in spite of Barak's emphasis on unemployment, etc., so the economic issue is not going to be decisive in the these particular elections.
2. The law pertaining to the direct election of the Prime Minister will have in the upcoming elections two kinds of possibly conflicting effects:
 - A. It will lead to the weakening of the two major parties (Labor and Likud) and the proliferation of ethnic parties or identity politics.
 - B. Whoever wins the Premiership will form the next government regardless of the number of seats that his party manages to muster. So, even if Likud gets 18 seats or 12 seats, but Netanyahu wins the election, he will be the one to form the government. Unlike in the past, it is now possible to be the head of the smallest party and yet be Prime Minister and put the puzzle together, which I would say works in favor of Netanyahu. What this means is that voting for the Prime Minister is more important than voting for parties.
3. I think that we should keep in mind the distinction between party line versus camp line in Israel. Whether you vote for Arab parties or for Meretz, when it comes to the peace issues or to forming a new government, you are in the same camp. Labor, Meretz and the Arab parties are all in the same camp, i.e., one that is interested in the Middle East Peace Process, the nature of the State, and being part of a government led by Labor. On the other hand, there is the 'other' camp, which is the one consisting of Mafdal, Tsomet, Moledet, Herut, the Russians, etc., which I do not believe is capable of forming a coalition government except with a Likud prime mi. No one can expect Benny Begin to form a government with Ehud Barak as Prime Minister.

Apart from the Left and Right camps - Meretz and the Arabs on one hand and the ultra-religious parties on the other hand – there are the three centrist parties, which are Likud (center-right), Labor (center-left) and Mordechai's party (center-center). With regard to the Arabs and Meretz, I would say we are talking about somewhere in the region of 20 seats, plus or minus, and the same applies to the ultra-religious or ultra-rightists. Half of the seats of the Knesset, I believe, will be distributed between the three center parties.
4. I think that the only big unknown in the next elections concerns Shas and the Russian Party led by Sharansky in particular and the Russian parties in general. I think these are the parties to watch because they are undecided as far as voting for the Prime Minister or coalition purposes is concerned.
5. As for the center-center party (Moredechai's), I suppose that it will not hurt Likud more than will hurt Labor as far as the number of seats is concerned and that it will find it easy to form a coalition with Labor. The possibility of the party entering a coalition with Netanyahu if he wins the elections should also not be excluded.

Concluding Remarks:

1. I agree with the other speaker's belief that the peace process is not the only major issue on the national agenda. However, I think that we should keep in mind that the final status negotiations are supposed to start immediately after these elections and that whoever becomes Prime Minister could easily claim that he has the mandate to implement his party's vision, which was not the case in 1996. So, if Barak were to win the elections, he could easily claim that he has the mandate to implement Labor's visions.

2. I do not expect that Mordechai will be Prime Minister, but I think that the importance of the Center Party will be in determining what kind of coalition government we will have after the elections. The peace process and the internal conflicts are the two issues on which this party is built.
3. In the absence of an economic crisis, the two equally central issues are the peace process on one hand and the State-religion issue on the other. If Netanyahu can find an acceptable formula for resolving the State-religion controversy, or at least manages to keep this conflict at a lower level of intensity, then I think that it is likely that he will win the elections.
4. One should keep an eye on the constituencies of Shas and the Russian Parties, which, from my point of view, are going to tip the balance in the elections for the Prime Minister. I agree that Shas is more moderate than the Russians are when it comes to the peace process, but the Russians are closer to Tsomet and Meretz than to any other party when it comes to State-religion issues. Clear and explicit instructions from the leaders of these two parties to vote for Netanyahu, and strict compliance by voters or supporters of these parties, would result in Netanyahu winning the elections. I think that these are the only two parties that can tip the balance in favor of Netanyahu. Only if the supporters of these two parties split could Barak possibly win.
5. Without the support of the Arabs in Israel, Barak cannot be Prime Minister. The question is really whether this support is enough for him to win and my answer is in the negative. If Barak wins with the support of the Arabs, will he be ready to pay the price? Will they – the Arabs - insist on exacting a higher price than before? This is a question for the Palestinian Arabs inside Israel.
6. If Netanyahu wins the elections, he will most probably form some sort of a national unity government. If Barak wins, it should be much easier for him to form a broadly based government without the national unity government mentioned by Danny.

In concluding, I would like to stress that I am not a politician, merely somebody who claims to be a critical observer.

Mr. Danny Ben-Simon: That was a very accurate presentation of Israeli politics. Concerning the suspension of Hebron and Wye, it is true, Peres suspended Hebron in order to please the religious and the right wing and Netanyahu did the same. It could be said that Peres lost because he was perceived as a manipulator, telling Arafat, "You wait three months until I get the votes and then we will apply the Hebron Accord." Netanyahu is doing more or less the same thing, telling the Americans, "Wait, the Wye Memorandum will be implemented once I win the elections." It seems to me that he is losing rather than gaining ground because of this manipulation; he has certainly lost Mordechai because of the Wye Plantation suspension.

I remember chatting with Netanyahu a month or so ago and telling him, upon being asked what I was doing these days, that I was writing a new book that could be described as his obituary. "I wrote a book about your victory four years ago," I told him, "and now I am writing now about your defeat."

It seems to me that Netanyahu suspended the Wye Memorandum against the interest of the people who had voted for him. My mother, for example, voted for Netanyahu, but she, like many others, is terribly disappointed by the way in which he is playing with the various accords and I suspect that she will now vote for Mordechai, based on this disappointment, the fact that she supports peace and the fact that she is Oriental.

Barak, I think, misjudged the effect that his tough stand would have on the public. He thought he would be applauded for saying, "The Palestinians are nothing and now we can get whatever we want; I am not like Peres, who gave away everything." People were not impressed by his tough speeches about the Orient House, etc., which is probably why he has recently adopted a more moderate stand and is now displaying a greater willingness to continue with the peace process. Only a few days ago he said that upon winning the elections, he would make sure that the Lebanese and maybe the Syrian issues were resolved. It would appear therefore that he has realized that going against the peace process is a guaranteed way to lose the elections.

His assumption is accurate: look, for example, at Peres, whose six months as Prime Minister were the bloodiest six months in the history of Israel. The 'man of peace' was trying to be the 'man of war' because he thought, incorrectly, that it was the only way to win votes and that the primitive Israelis enjoy the sight of Arab blood. His arrogance began with Yahya Ayyash and ended with the Qana Massacre, and all the time he was reading the Israeli voters wrongly. Netanyahu is now making the same mistake.

Professor Said Zeedani: It might not be working, but is it not true that the implementation of Wye was suspended because of pressure from the rightists?

Mr. Danny Ben-Simon: Peres acted no differently when Rabbi Ovadia Yossef came to him crying "Hebron, Hebron, Hebron." We could say that one wanted to appease the right wing, the other the religious.

One thing worth noting is that in the Labor Party elections two weeks ago, we ended up with Ehud Barak as number one, Peres as number two, David Levy as number three, Shlomo Ben Ami as number four, and Yossi Beilin as number five; in other words, we ended up with the most dovish list since 1948. With regard to the Likud, we find Sylvan Shalom, Meir Shetreet, and Moshe Katzav, again, the more dovish members of the party at the top. Only a few years ago we had Arens and Sharon etc. and when Bibi tried to impose Arens and Sharon, it simply didn't work; they came 25th and 26th, which was humiliating.

The point is that more Israelis are ready to go forward and are imposing an agenda on their leaders. Netanyahu came to terms with this fact when he learned his lesson in the internal elections, which is why you don't hear him going on about the Orient House so much anymore.

Mr. Walid Assali: Among the factors that would influence the results of the elections, there are two important elements on which I agree with you, namely, that the Arabs will vote for the Labor, Likud and Shas, and the Russians are divided. However, do not agree that the political

factor is the most important element, especially in the election of the Prime Minister. The religious element is clear and it is very important in the Israeli society. The peace element, on the other hand, which is the major element, is still not clear because Netanyahu is manipulating everybody. It is not true that all parties are for peace and that it is only a matter of time. Peace for the Likud and for Barak is a peace for which no price has to be paid.

Mr. Danny Ben-Simon: Did you know that in 1981, Labor and Likud had 96 seats in the Knesset, but by 1996, they had only 56, which means they lost 40 seats in 15 years? Now, they are expected to have 40 or 45 together, which means that they have become irrelevant in the eyes of Israelis; they do not understand the agenda, which is why they are being punished election after election. They cannot understand why they are losing ground; they are making peace, the economy is prospering, but people are losing faith because these two big parties have lost touch. Labor and Likud have two seats each on the Jerusalem Council, whereas Shas has seven - in Tel Aviv and Haifa it is practically the same - while the Green Party has five seats, twice as many as Labor and Likud. Barak and Netanyahu are the leaders of yesterday and the people are moving forward.

Professor Said Zeedani: I think that people were aware that the introduction during the last elections of the new law pertaining to the direct elections of the Prime Minister might lead to this proliferation into many parties and the reduction in the number of seats as far as the major two parties are concerned. Were the law to be cancelled, the whole map could change. You say that it would not, but I think that it might and I am not the only one who says that.

Mr. Danny Ben-Simon: The direct elections were the result of the proliferation within the Israeli society.

Professor Said Zeedani: But you cannot ignore the fact that when the law was applied, there was a significant reduction in the number of seats allocated to Labor and Likud.

I believe that when you are talking about the peace process or the State/religion issues, which are the two central issues in the upcoming elections, then you have to see the many ways in which they are interrelated.

My third comment here is that without the peace process, without these competing visions regarding the Final Status, there are no differences between Labor and Likud as far as the other issues are concerned. Therefore, it is very important that Labor emphasizes its vision for the Final Status, but it is equally important on the part of Netanyahu and the Likud that they show that their vision is not different or at least not radically different. Everybody can see that with these people ranking highest on the list of Labor, the party will probably agree on a Palestinian state minus this and that, but with Likud, they are officially against a Palestinian state and it is hard to judge what final conclusion they will reach and whether Netanyahu will accept a Palestinian state in the same way that Barak will accept a Palestinian state.

Ms. Sue Heher: Concerning the Arab vote, if something similar to what happened during the 1996 elections happened now, what would be the implications? Why do you think that Peres lost the elections? And what do you think the situation will be like 50 years from now?

Mr. Danny Ben-Simon: I spent three days in Nazareth this week, so I am in a position to answer your question. The people I spoke to said that in 1996, 95 percent of the Arabs voted for Shimon Peres, and remember, this was after the Qana Massacre, because they thought that Netanyahu was a danger. Now, they are telling me that Barak will not even win 70 percent of the votes because he is saying no to the Palestinian state, no to Jerusalem, no to the 1967 borders and no to having another army in the Jordan Valley. As far as they are concerned, it is better to have Netanyahu because at least if Netanyahu makes peace, most Israelis will support him. Nevertheless, they will not vote for him because they feel that voting for Labor, one of the two major parties, for 48 years has not helped that much. They said "We want to be like Shas and to do for the Arabs what Shas did for the Sephardi" and I think that this is the smartest approach. Barak thinks that he has got the Israeli Arabs in his pocket, but it seems to me as if he is in for a big surprise.

Now, Peres might not have lost the 1996 elections had he acted in a more conciliatory manner with the Palestinians. Instead, when he became Prime Minister, the first thing he did was to make peace with the settlers, and he only saw Arafat once, in May 1996, after Arafat put pressure on him. He lost not because of the 10,000 Arab votes that he lost, but because of the Jewish vote. People wanted security, and Netanyahu came with a huge security agenda, although this is only one in a long list of factors.

Most Israelis are optimistic concerning the short term but pessimistic concerning the long run. They are trying to have as much fun as they can because they say: "Tomorrow, who knows?" This is something that seems to be genetically installed in this people, some kind of Jewish phenomenon; maybe it has no roots, but it is in their heads.

Mr. Walid Assali: I believe that another very important, if not the most important reason why the Likud and Labor lost seats is the proportional electoral system with closed lists. The small parties turn around the big ones, but we should not forget that they have banks and organizations, etc. that back them and give them a great deal of power.

Professor Said Zeedani: In the age we are living in, with all this talk about post-modernism and multi-culturalism, I think that ethnic politics is becoming important not only in Israel and Palestine, but also internationally - *politiques de fin de siècle*. I mean that these ethnic groups are raising a circle of specific interests, such as women's issues, and consequently we have all these issue-oriented parties. Proportional elections is not something new in Israel, but what is new is the direct election of the Prime Minister that was applied for the first time in 1996 and will probably be applied for the last time in 1999.

Now, as to the Palestinian Arabs inside Israel, we are talking about Palestinians inside Israel, about a society within a society. The Palestinian Arab society has its own pluralism, its own right, left and center, and its own pace of development, and to expect the Arab Israelis to vote overwhelmingly for Barak is too much to expect, even though 95 percent of them voted for Peres. What is central for the Arab Israelis

is the economy, their status as a minority *vis-à-vis* the Jewish State and their struggle to transform it from a Jewish state into a state that is dedicated and committed to equality between citizens regardless of race and gender. I think that these are the main issues when it comes to the Palestinians inside Israel.

The Israeli Arabs are not an ingenious group. There are the Druze who are more attached to Likud, and there are the Bedouin who have a different voting pattern, but I do not think that they are going to make a decisive difference because they have no alternative but to support Barak, at least when it comes to the second round. However, this support will not be enough.

Ms. Julie Trottier: Is there any gender basis for the upcoming elections?

Mr. Danny Ben-Simon: There is no talk about having something on a gender basis. It is a new phenomenon, which started recently in the Labor Party elections with the women calling for '*sherion*', which means reserving seats for women. The gender issue has to be imposed on the political parties because there is no gender agenda. I would say that it has just started to emerge as an issue, and we will have a women's party for the first time - at least one major party - but it will not be as developed as in the States.

Professor Said Zeedani: The women's movements are pushing for it. I mean you have the wife of Eitan who formed a party for women, and I think that each of the parties will eventually end up reserving seats for women. This was the case with Labor and with Likud.

What needs to be taken into account is the previous pattern of voting. In the case of the Palestinians inside Israel, there is the Communist Party, which have lost the agenda and their ideology, but they still have the apparatus and people who are used to voting for them, regardless of the candidates.

Mr. Danny Ben-Simon: Some people are saying as a joke that even if you put Yasser Arafat at the head of the Likud, we will vote Likud.

In general, religious people will vote for the religious party and Orientals for the Likud, unless they are more religious, in which case they will vote for Shas. It is very tribal. People in Tel Aviv will vote for Barak even if he declares war on Iraq or on Jordan because they say "Barak is one of us." They will never vote Netanyahu, even if he makes peace with the whole Middle East, because they consider him an outsider.

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: There was a workshop in Oxford where the participants discussed the Israeli elections and came with the conclusion that Barak will be the Prime Minister, Netanyahu the Foreign Minister and Mordechai the Minister of Defense and that Arafat will declare a state, there will not be a problem and the peace process will continue.

Mr. Danny Ben-Simon: I also believe that the three of them will be in the government and the peace process will continue.

Professor Said Zeedani: If Netanyahu wins the premiership, there might be a real unity government, whereas Barak does not need Netanyahu to form a government.

Mr. Danny Ben-Simon: I think that anyone who wins will go for this formula.

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: Are people concerned about the 4th of May.

Mr. Danny Ben-Simon: Not at all.

During the Hebron vote in 1997, Peres was having a cocktail in Kissinger's house in New York and he called me and said: "Daniel, how are things in the Knesset?" I said: "They voted, with a big majority, to accept the Hebron Accord." He then asked me if there had been any big demonstrations, and I told him that there had not, so he said, "But those bastards demonstrated against me!" to which I replied: "Shimon, I think that you should have done this yourself, you had an accord." "But Daniel," he said, "if I had done it, I would have been shot." "So why," I asked him, "did you want to become a Prime Minister?" The Left cannot lead a peace process properly.

Professor Said Zeedani: If Barak were to form a government with the Mafdal, Shas and the Russians without the Likud, it is unlikely that he would have the same problem as Peres in 1996.

Mr. Hamed Qawasmeh: Is there a good chance that the Jewish underground is going to cause trouble?

Mr. Danny Ben-Simon: There is talk about a mutiny in Hebron, where there is an overdose of madness among the settlers. One person is enough to kill the Prime Minister, so of course there is talk that they will do anything to prevent a settlement. From what I understand, we are not talking about the whole settlement movement, but about a few hundred people who have been followed closely since Rabin's assassination. Today, if you use the slogans that were used in Rabin's time, you end up going to jail. They used to call Rabin a traitor every two minutes in the Knesset and everywhere else, but that is not possible now. The Israeli public does not tolerate this kind of talk anymore, so there is lack of legitimacy and the potential troublemakers are being watched very closely.

Professor Said Zeedani: With a rightwing government in power, I think that it is a completely different game for the settlers and for the ultra-nationalists. The existence of a leftwing government might encourage the settlers to engage in that kind of trouble making again. It all depends on the type of the government and the prevailing ideologies.

Mr. Danny Ben-Simon: Rabin's assassination changed many things.

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: And the Americans?

Mr. Danny Ben-Simon: They are being very quiet because Clinton was the head of the reelection committee for Shimon Peres. When Peres was Prime Minister, he was always available. Not only that, but he made available all his advisors, and it seems to me that the election of Netanyahu made things difficult for the Americans and they are no longer as active as they were back then. Before 1996, they did not know that in order to carry on with the peace process, you cannot really discredit the right wing and that you need to have not only people who can sign peace agreements, but also people who can prepare the public for peace and win their support. I personally do not think it will be such bad news if Netanyahu is elected because the Israeli agenda is to continue with the peace process and, ideally, to have a unity government.

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: Everybody is saying that Netanyahu is a danger to Israel, that he is not the man to make peace.

Mr. Danny Ben-Simon: I am talking about the Americans. Rabin was assassinated because of Hebron, Jericho and Gaza. This guy is signing away 42 percent yet there has not been even one demonstration. I was talking about when a rightwing government signs a peace agreement and when a leftwing government does it, about the Israeli public's acceptance of peace, which is extremely important; that is why the Americans would like to see somebody like Mordechai in charge.

Ms. Sue Heher: If Arafat were to declare a state on the 4th of May, what sort of effect would it have on the results of the elections?

Mr. Danny Ben-Simon: I do not think that he will, but if he does, I do not think that Israelis will be so shocked. There is some sense that the timing is not good and the timing was set by politicians, not by the public. They say that the 4th of May is unacceptable, so what about the 17 May, 18 May, or 2 June, after the elections? Most Israelis are living with the idea that there will be, at some time or another, a Palestinian state. Arafat is aware of the inside problems and that is why he will postpone the declaration in order to gain more regional and international acceptance.