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The Election Obama Will Lose

When Netanyahu's coalition wins Israeli elections on Tuesday, it will mark a huge loss for the country—and for Obama, writes Robert Shrum.

by [Robert Shrum \(/contributors/robert-shrum.html\)](/contributors/robert-shrum.html) | January 17, 2013 1:51 PM EST

The day after the inauguration will bring bad news for Barack Obama—and it will have nothing to do with the debt cliff or gun control. The mounting danger will be guns, bullets, and bombs far away, yet drawing ominously closer. And because I don't have to be confirmed to anything, I can address it plainly.



Only the people of Israel can decide who will represent their best interests, Netanyahu said Wednesday in remarks directed at U.S. President Barack Obama a week before a general election. (David Buimovitch/AFP/Getty)

Israel holds an election on Jan. 22, and here is the almost certain outcome: after more than half a decade that has been very good politically for Benjamin Netanyahu—and very bad for the country’s long-term security—things will get worse as the results push or empower the Israeli prime minister and his coalition to take a harder, even more intransigent line. That, in turn, could leave the Jewish state "a lone tree in a desert," as [President Shimon Peres has warned](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/13/magazine/shimon-peres-on-obama-iran-and-the-path-to-peace.html?pagewanted=all) (<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/13/magazine/shimon-peres-on-obama-iran-and-the-path-to-peace.html?pagewanted=all>).

We have strayed far from the path toward peace forged in the 1990s by Peres and Yitzhak Rabin, who was assassinated by one of his own countrymen in the square in Tel Aviv that now bears his name. It was in that same square, three years later, that 300,000 Israelis spontaneously gathered to celebrate the end of Netanyahu’s first term as prime minister and the landslide triumph of Ehud Barak, who was determined to resume and finish Rabin’s work.

With Bill Clinton playing a central role, Barak ultimately offered Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat an agreement that shortly before would have been unthinkable in Israeli politics: the return of most of the West Bank, with compensating land swaps, and a portion of Jerusalem’s Old City. Arafat finally rejected the settlement, hard-bargained at Camp David and then Taba on the Red Sea, just as Clinton was leaving office. Arafat did call the president to tell him he was a great man. No, Clinton recalled replying in his memoirs: “I am not a great man. I am a failure, and you made me one.”

Days later, Barak lost as big as he had won less than two years before. I was a consultant in both campaigns. On the verge of defeat, Barak told me that something like the Camp David/Taba deal was the only viable way to end the conflict. And it had to be ended sooner or later or Israel would face a permanent and potentially mortal threat.

The Israelis all but explicitly spurning peace will grievously imperil their own country.

The next two prime ministers, both prominent in the right-wing Likud, seemed to understand that. Perhaps they were channeling Menachem Begin, the party’s founder, who defied all preconceptions by signing the original Camp David accords, making peace with Anwar Sadat and returning the Sinai to Egypt.

After he trounced Barak, Ariel Sharon, long the fiercest of hawks, turned toward negotiation and unilaterally withdrew Israeli forces from Gaza. He was challenged for the party leadership by Netanyahu, barely prevailed 52 to 48 percent, and soon founded his own moderate party, Kadima. Felled by a cerebral hemorrhage in 2006—he is still in a coma today—Sharon was succeeded in Kadima and as prime minister by Ehud Olmert, who at the Annapolis Conference pretty much renewed the Barak-Clinton offer. It was Arafat’s successor, Mahmoud Abbas, who quibbled, hesitated, and then walked away.

History repeated itself—or, in the words of former Israeli foreign minister Abba Eban, the Palestinians “never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity.”

Then, in the 2009 election, with Olmert forced out of office by corruption charges later dismissed, Kadima captured the most seats of any party. But Netanyahu managed to put together a coalition that brought him back to power. He has given lip service to the two-state solution, yet under his leadership, proliferation of West Bank settlements has replaced any genuine pursuit of peace.

The Israelis wanting peace will not make it so. But the Israelis all but explicitly spurning peace will grievously

imperil their own country. More than ever, that is the specter cast by this election, which Netanyahu called early because he was convinced he would strengthen his hand, capturing 45 of the 61 seats required for a Knesset majority.

To maximize his prospects against an opposition in disarray, he merged his party with the ultra-nationalist Beiteinu. That party is headed by Netanyahu's foreign minister, a refugee from the former Soviet Union who disdainfully rejects anything other than token territorial concessions and has derided Arabs in near-racist terms.

The lurch to the right was then reinforced by the Likud primaries, which decided the rank order of candidates. They run as a national slate and the number of seats a party claims reflects its share of the popular vote. You go to the Knesset if you are high enough on the list.

What happened in those primaries is similar to the Tea Party dominance in so many Republican primaries. Danny Danon, who moved up to sixth on the list from 24th in the last election, rejects a two-state solution and would annex huge swathes of Palestinian territory, leaving the Palestinians semi-landless. Moshe Feiglin, who is 15th on the list and sure to get a seat, proposes rebuilding the ancient Temple, a move that would spark a conflagration with the Muslim world as Al-Aqsa and the Dome of the Rock came crashing down.

Also harrowing: A recent poll shows that a new extremist party called Jewish Home could [chalk up 16 seats](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/jan/05/binyamin-netanyahu-rightwing-poll) (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/jan/05/binyamin-netanyahu-rightwing-poll>). The party's leader, Naftali Bennett, is an American-born centi-millionaire who resembles a younger, fitter Sheldon Adelson. [Bennett says the conflict with the Palestinians](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/jan/07/naftali-bennett-interview-jewish-home) (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/jan/07/naftali-bennett-interview-jewish-home>) is “insoluble” and sounds almost happy about it. He insists: “There is not going to be a Palestinian state in the tiny land of Israel.”

The final surveys show the “hard-line bloc” [winning a comfortable majority of 67 to 72 seats](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/polls-give-comfortable-edge-to-netanyahus-hard-line-bloc-in-israeli-elections/2013/01/17/d8c88ff4-607c-11e2-bc4f-1f06fffb7acf_story.html) (http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/polls-give-comfortable-edge-to-netanyahus-hard-line-bloc-in-israeli-elections/2013/01/17/d8c88ff4-607c-11e2-bc4f-1f06fffb7acf_story.html). The trend, as [American pollster Mark Mellman writes](http://thehill.com/opinion/columnists/mark-mellman/277387-israelis-on-subject-of-peace) (<http://thehill.com/opinion/columnists/mark-mellman/277387-israelis-on-subject-of-peace>), doesn't point to the rejection of a Clinton/Barak-like agreement; 68 percent of Israelis would support it, about the same numbers we saw in 2000. Rather, that Israelis are “divided within” themselves, believing that peace is not possible.

That's not irrational given past rejections of a reasonable settlement and the sudden fragility of once-settled relationships in the region. But what is irrational is a reactionary Israeli regime that in one part of the coalition renounces peace altogether—and in the more “moderate” part resists a settlement while pretending to be open to one.

This would be an insurmountable problem for Obama and the U.S., complicating efforts to navigate the changing Arab world and tempting the administration to treat the peace process as a token exercise at best. The president's private view was [recently described as resigned and blunt](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/9803490/Barack-Obama-says-Benjamin-Netanyahu-doesnt-know-what-is-good-for-Israel.html) (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/9803490/Barack-Obama-says-Benjamin-Netanyahu-doesnt-know-what-is-good-for-Israel.html>): “Israel doesn't know what its own best interests are.” As *Haaretz* reported, the president was promptly denounced by Likud officials for interfering in the Israeli elections, an LOL moment given Netanyahu's prominence as a Romney surrogate in 2012.

The newspaper expressed the fear that Israel was headed for “near total isolation.” Shimon Peres, also criticized

for his pre-election candor, was explicit about the dangers: weapons “flow[ing]” to terrorists, “most of the world” against Israel, the economy “suffer[ing] gravely if a boycott is declared against us.”

In the near term, an Israeli government even more indifferent or hostile to peace will make it more difficult to deal with Iran without triggering regional chaos and global energy instability. But beyond this, that kind of government is an existential threat to Israel itself. Peres, who created the Israeli nuclear deterrent, knows that the country cannot permanently endure as an apartheid state ruling over the Palestinians, censured and opposed by many who should be allies, clinging to the bomb and its bond with the United States.

In theory, a reelected Netanyahu could follow in the footsteps of Begin, Sharon, Olmert—and yes, Rabin, Peres, and Barak. There is no evidence he wants to, and plenty to prove the opposite. In any event, the coalition he's assembled, the political bargain he's made, the forces he's enabled exemplified by Bennett, will give him his majority but box him in. At this point, a smart Israeli prime minister would put a draft of Camp David/Taba or Olmert's Annapolis proposals on the table every Friday and announce a readiness to sign on if the Palestinians will. Netanyahu won't and can't be that smart.

Peres still hopes to “see ... peace come to this dismal and wonderful ... part of the world.” It is wonderful; I've cared about Israel as long as I can remember and known it since I first went there in 1981. But the prospects for peace are increasingly dismal. While the fault lies not in Tel Aviv alone or even primarily, a rejectionist government will force the country to pay a steep, perhaps ultimately incalculable price.

Obama will lose Tuesday's election—and so will Israel.

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