

Political

update: Livni wins Kadima leadership primary by narrowest margin – 19 September

Key points:

- Tzipi Livni has won the race to become the next chairman of the Kadima party, the largest party in the Israeli Knesset.
- Livni will become Israel's second ever female Prime Minister if she can form a governing coalition.
- Livni beat her main rival, Shaul Mofaz, by just 431 votes.

Latest developments

- Israeli Foreign Minister, Tzipi Livni has won Wednesday's Kadima Primary leadership election, beating her rivals Transport Minister Shaul Mofaz, Minister of the Interior, Meir Sheerit and Minister of Public Security, Avi Dichter (17 September 2008).
- Tzipi Livni won 43.1% of the vote amongst Kadima's membership to Mofaz's 42%. The two other candidates, Meir Sheerit and Avi Dichter, came a distant third and fourth with 8.4% and 6.5% of the vote respectively. Despite the election exit polls indicating a landslide victory for Tzipi Livni over Shaul Mofaz, Livni beat Mofaz in the Kadima primary by a margin of 431 votes, a difference of 1.1 percent. Turnout in the primary was 55%.
- In her victory speech at 6:15am on Thursday morning, Livni said that she would seek to form a new coalition government "as quickly as possible" and called for party unity. She said:

"All the people who came to vote today expressed what they wish to happen in this country... The national responsibility [bestowed] by the public brings me to approach this job with great reverence." (18/09/08)
- In reference to opponents and her party, Livni said:

"they were rivals of the moment, but together we have one mission. Together we will create government stability... The responsibility is not solely mine, but also on members of Kadima." (18/09/08)
- President Shimon Peres cannot officially ask Livni to try to form a government until the current Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert resigns to become a caretaker Prime Minister. Once Livni is assigned with the task she will have 42 days to form a new ruling coalition. If successful she will become Israel's first female Prime Minister since Golda Meir resigned in 1974. If she fails to form a coalition, the country will hold elections in early 2009, a year and a half ahead of schedule.
- Olmert phoned Livni on Wednesday evening to congratulate her on her victory after TV exit polls indicated she had won by a landslide. Olmert wished Livni good luck

and told her she would receive his full cooperation in passing on the role of leadership if she is capable of establishing a coalition (17 September).

- Mofaz was regarded as having a better chance at forming a ruling coalition, but polls have showed that Livni would be a stronger candidate in a general election against Likud's Benjamin Netanyahu.
- Mofaz accepted the primary result, despite his lawyers' advice to launch an appeal over the extension of the voting time by 30 minutes, the disqualification of a ballot box from the Rahat area and the publishing of exit polls 15 minutes before the ballots closed. Mofaz has since announced that he is retiring from politics (18 September).
- Eli Yishai, leader of the ultra-Orthodox Shas party, a key coalition partner in Olmert's Government, quickly laid out his conditions for taking part in a new coalition, including ruling out any negotiations with the Palestinians. Yishai, however, hinted that the party would drop its demand for increased child allowances, provided that the Treasury agrees to some sort of increased assistance for the poorer parts of society. Yishai told Israeli Army Radio that Livni:

“must provide answers to poverty. We won't give up on our ideals, whether you call them [child] allowances, assistance, subsidies or grants to families with children. The name doesn't interest me.” (18/09/08)

- Israeli Army Radio has reported that Labor is likely to stay in the coalition to prevent the strengthening of Likud (18 September).

Background

- Tzipi Livni was a successful lawyer and served for a short period in the Mossad intelligence agency before she became a member of the Knesset. She began her political career in Likud.
- Livni was appointed Foreign Minister after the Kadima election victory in March 2006, and held this position during the Second Lebanon War. As Foreign Minister she has also been serving as the head of the Israeli negotiations team with the Palestinian Authority since the Annapolis Conference in November 2007. Livni's involvement in these negotiations means that she is regarded by many as Israel's best hope for a negotiated peace settlement between the Israelis and Palestinians.
- If Livni becomes Prime Minister, she will have done so with very little experience in security affairs. She has been attacked for this perceived weakness, particularly since the failures of the Second Lebanon War are widely regarded by the public to have been the result of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's lack of experience in security affairs.
- The premiership of the current Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, was damaged by a series of five criminal investigations, which began in January 2007, into various charges of corruption and financial misconduct against him when he was Finance Minister, Minister of Commerce and Industry and when he was running for Mayor of Jerusalem in 1993.
- The Kadima leadership race was triggered by Labour Chairman and Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak, when he threatened that Labor would leave Ehud Olmert's coalition, forcing a general election, if he refused to step down and set a date for Kadima primaries. After a lengthy internal political struggle, Kadima set 17 September as the date for its elections.
- While Olmert's premiership has not survived the charges of corruption, it did survive a damning enquiry into the handling of the Second Lebanon War of 2006. Known as

the “Winograd Report,” published in January 2008, it condemned the decisions made by Olmert during the conflict. While Olmert remained in post as Prime Minister over this crisis, Minister of Defence, Amir Peretz and the Chief of Staff, Dan Halutz resigned.

- Olmert has not yet been convicted of any crime and some of the allegations against him have been dropped due to a lack of evidence. Olmert continues to express his innocence in all charges.