

Political

update:– Israeli election results: Second place Likud vie for chance to form a Government over Tzipi Livni’s winning Kadima party – 11 February

Key points:

- 97.5 percent of the general election ballots have been counted
- Kadima remains Israel’s largest single party in the Knesset securing 28 seats
- The electorate has rewarded Likud’s right-wing stance, with the party upping its Knesset seats from 12 to 27. The last remaining votes could increase Likud’s seats further
- The right-wing bloc has gained more seats than the left and centre combined, meaning that Likud is more likely than Kadima to form a coalition
- The Labor party have fared poorly, receiving just 13 seats and are likely to return to the opposition benches
- Despite predictions of the dramatic rise of Avigdor Lieberman’s right-wing Yisrael Beiteinu party, it is the Likud party that has taken votes from the centre and the left. Yisrael Beiteinu only managed to take seats from other right-wing parties

Latest developments

- With 97.5 percent of the general election ballots counted, the unofficial result is that, despite polls predicting the decline of centrist Kadima, it remains Israel’s largest party with 28 seats. Tzipi Livni, Kadima Chairwoman, said:

“All that remains now is to do the right thing, to respect the choice of Israel’s citizens, to respect the voter’s choice, to do what is correct for Israel at this time, particularly in the face of the security, diplomatic and economic challenges, internal and external, and join a unity government headed by us, on the basis of the large parties in Israel, to the left and the right of Kadima.”
(11/02/09)

- Despite Kadima’s success, it is the right-wing Likud party, chaired by Benjamin Netanyahu that will have a better chance of forming a governing coalition after winning 27 seats, up from 12 in the last general election. Any successful governing coalition requires 61 seats in the 120 seat Knesset and whilst Kadima has one more seat than Likud, the right-wing bloc is now collectively stronger than the centre or left blocs. In addition, the last remaining votes to be counted are the approximately 175,000 ballots from the army, which are likely to favour Likud over Kadima.
- In approximately a week’s time, Israeli President Shimon Peres is expected to invite either Netanyahu or Livni to attempt to form a coalition. That party leader will have an initial period of four weeks, followed by a possible extension of two weeks, to complete the task. This could take the process to 2 April. In the event that a coalition

is not formed, the President can invite another Knesset member to attempt to form a government.

- The Labor Party, chaired by Defense Minister Ehud Barak, has had a disappointing result, with its Knesset seats cut from 19 to 13, relegating it to fourth position for the first time in Israeli political history. The left-wing New Movement – Meretz party also fared poorly gaining only three Knesset seats, despite a high-profile re-launch in November 2008.
- In response to initial results late on Tuesday (10 February), Ehud Barak said that his party would not hesitate to form the opposition:

“As we’ve always done, we will think over what is best for Labor, and more importantly, what is best for the country. We won’t serve in a government that isn’t established by the specifications of our path, and we won’t hesitate to go to the opposition and serve the people from there.”
(10/02/09)

- Aluf Benn of Israel’s Haaretz newspaper has argued that Kadima’s lack of a clear electoral mandate over Likud and the decline of the Labor party mean that the two should officially merge, creating a new, stable and dominant centrist Knesset bloc:

“The merge would bolster those who support a two-state solution with the Palestinians and a peace agreement with Syria, and would hurt the right-wing MKs that would seek to block any such deal.” (11/10/09)

- This general election has seen the rise of the Yisrael Beiteinu party, chaired by Avigdor Lieberman. The right-wing party only has 11 seats in the current Knesset, but received 15 in the election. It will be the third biggest party in the new Knesset and is likely to be a necessary partner in any governing coalition.
- Yisrael Beiteinu has increased its Knesset seats at the expense of Israel’s right-wing religious parties (Shas, Jewish Home, United Torah Judaism and National Union), which received 27 seats in the last election (March 2006) but only 23 in Tuesday’s (10 February) election.
- Netanyahu has appointed lawyer and former Minister of Justice Professor Yaakov Ne’eman to head Likud’s coalition negotiation team, whilst Livni has chosen Vice Premier Haim Ramon, Knesset Speaker Dalia Itzik and Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee Chairman Tzahi Hanegbi. Preliminary coalition talks have already begun, with Livni meeting Avigdor Lieberman and Netanyahu meeting Shas Party Chairman Eli Yishai.
- The popularity of Israel’s two Arab parties (United Arab List-Ta’al and Balad) has remained exactly the same with four and three seats respectively. Hadash, the largely Arab supported communist party, has dropped from four seats to three.
- The single issue Pensioners Party, which won seven seats in the 2006 election, has disappeared from the Knesset altogether.

Background

- This election was fought against the backdrop of the recent conflict in Gaza and southern Israel, which received the overwhelming support of Israel’s Jewish public. The Israeli War and Peace Index survey, carried approximately half-way through Operation Cast Lead, showed 94 percent support for the operation amongst Jewish respondents. The survey, however, found that 85 percent of Israeli Arabs (20 percent of the population) opposed military action.

- Likud, not part of the current coalition or involved in the conflict, has substantially benefited from Operation Cast Lead. According to Asher Arian of the Israel Democratic Institute, an independent research centre in Jerusalem, Netanyahu's public stance as a champion of security fits the current "mood in the country."
- Kadima's better than predicted election result was both partly due to Tzipi Livni's prominent role in the Gaza conflict as Foreign Minister and Netanyahu's polarising effect on the Israeli electorate. Many previous Labor and Meretz supporters voted Kadima on Tuesday (10 February) specifically to prevent Netanyahu becoming Prime Minister. Netanyahu's Premiership between 1996 and 1999 is remembered for numerous corruption scandals and, as Finance Minister between 2003 and 2005, he is blamed for increasing poverty through drastic welfare cuts.
- Whilst Labor did poorly in the election, it did better than the 11 seats it was predicted when the election was first announced in October 2008. The Labor leader and Defense Minister Ehud Barak's central role in the war may have slightly improved the party's fortunes. A poll on 14 January saw Barak's personal approval rating rise to 70 percent from its level of 52 percent two weeks earlier, with many respondents wanting him to stay on as Defense Minister.
- Yisrael Beiteinu, like Likud, did well in the election due to an increased national focus on security in the wake of the Gaza conflict, with many voters supporting Chairman Avigdor Lieberman's stance that the war did not go far enough. On 19 January he said:

"The politicians haven't translated the military achievements into political ones. The soldiers succeeded, but the politicians failed. They didn't let the army complete the operation, so no conclusion was reached... The strategic objective of the operation should have been the collapse of Hamas." (19/01/09)

- Yisrael Beiteinu is a non-religious, right-wing, nationalist party, in favour of reducing the number of Israeli Arab citizens by redrawing the country's borders with a future Palestinian state. The party left the Kadima-led governing coalition in January 2008, objecting to the Annapolis Peace Process negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.
- Tzipi Livni called for early elections on Sunday 26 October after becoming Kadima's new Chairwoman and failing to form a governing coalition. Livni's coalition talks ended in deadlock due to her refusal to accommodate the demands of the ultra-orthodox Sephardic Shas Party. As a condition of its involvement in a coalition, the Shas Party had been demanding "family payments" worth NIS 1 billion annually (£155 million) and that Jerusalem not be negotiated in any future peace deal with the Palestinians.

Party (* = in current governing coalition)	2009 general election results – number of Knesset seats with 97.5 percent of votes counted	2006 general election results – number of Knesset seats
Kadima* (centre)	28	29
Likud (right)	27	12
Yisrael Beitenu (religious-right)	15	11
Labor* (left)	13	19

Meretz (left)	3	5
Shas* (religious-right)	11	12
Jewish Home (religious-right)	3	5
United Torah Judaism (religious-right)	5	6
National Union (religious-right)	4	4
Pensioners Party* (single issue)	0	7
United Arab List-Ta'al (Arab)	4	4
Balad (Arab)	3	3
Hadash (far-left Arab)	4	3