

Quo vadis Avoda?

- Comments on the State of Affairs of the Labor Party and the Israeli Left

DR. RALF HEXEL
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- The Israeli left-wing parties (Avoda, Meretz) are facing an existential crisis and there's no end in sight. Both parties lack the political will and political creativity to develop sustainable new perspectives;
- Avoda and Meretz are no longer the leading political voices of the Israeli peace camp. It is Kadima they lost that prominent role to. And with it, they lost their political substance;
- As a result of a near uninterrupted government participation over the past ten years, combined with a discrepancy between word and deed in its policy, Avoda lost its key political asset: its credibility;
- The political and social footing of the left-wing parties has shrunk dramatically. Kadima is ousting them from power in the middle classes and they are finding even less support among the religious moderates and fringe groups such as the Arab community and the Israelis of Russian decent;
- The Israeli Left is intellectually uninspired and politically speechless, and unable to develop compelling alternatives to right-wing policies;
- Kadima is not a center-left party, but a centrist party. Kadima is not a solution to the Left's problems. Only the Left can reinvent itself.



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In the 80th year of its existence, the social democratic Labor Party (Avoda), founded in 1930, is facing a crisis that is threatening its very existence. The present crisis at the same time demonstrates to what extent the entire political Left in Israel stands on shaky ground. It became apparent to every observer that the main left-wing parties had considerably lost influence and political significance when they suffered a dramatic defeat in the February 2009 Knesset elections. Only 13 out of 120 seats went to Ehud Barak's Labor Party. That was six down compared to the 2006 elections, leaving Labor only the fourth most powerful parliamentary faction. For decades, the party had shaped the country's politics, economy and society. In 1992, under the helm of Yitzhak Rabin, it had placed no less than 44 representatives in the Knesset. But at the 18th Knesset elections, it went down in a crushing defeat. The result was equally devastating for Meretz, with the number of mandates reduced from five to three.

According to current polls, both parties have failed to reverse this trend towards political insignificance. The latest polling results suggest that if elections were held now, the Labor Party, which entered the right-wing government coalition of Benjamin Netanyahu following the elections of 2009, would receive between six and nine mandates, whereas Meretz would have to make do with four to five seats. Thus, the political outlook, for Labor in particular, remains grim.

When analyzing the state of affairs of the Israeli left-wing parties, when probing the causes of their demise, or searching for ways towards political recovery, there is the following to consider: in Israel, political parties are formed not merely on the basis of political-ideological positions and values. Ethnic and religious identities and fringe group interests are just as instrumental. The result is a highly fragmented party landscape, which perfectly mirrors the heterogeneous population of this country of immigrants.

Basically, the political parties rank themselves along the following three lines of conflict:

- 1) there is the rank of the Jewish-Palestinian/ Arab conflict; 2) the rank of the secular-religious conflicts; 3) the rank of social and economic issues. In Israeli discourse, whether a party is considered left- or right-wing depends nearly exclusively on its positioning in terms of security policy and foreign policy. To put it plainly: In Israel, those who favour the two-state solu-

tion vis-à-vis the Palestinians and a peaceful coexistence with the country's Arab neighbors are considered left-wing. Right-wingers are those who oppose or adamantly reject such a proposal.

The present analysis focuses on the leftist Zionist camp and does not incorporate the communist Hadash Party (four Knesset mandates). The majority of Hadash members are Arab, but the Party has Jewish members too. Hadash defines itself as non-Zionist.

1. The 2009 Elections – Rightward shift and persistent left-wing demise

Three phenomena characterised the Knesset elections of February 10, 2009:

Firstly, the electoral results clearly pointed to a shift to the right in Israeli society. The right-wing/ ultra-Orthodox camp won 65 of the 120 Knesset seats. With 28 seats, the centrist party, Kadima, was the winner of the elections. Yet, since the majority of the parties represented in the Knesset favoured Netanyahu as the new prime minister, it was not Kadima's chairwoman, Tzipi Livni, but Likud chairman, Benjamin Netanyahu, who was asked by the country's president, Shimon Peres, to form a government.

Secondly, the dramatic defeat of Avoda and Meretz reflected their persistent loss of political significance. Jointly, they claimed only 16 of a total of 120 seats, compared to 56 after the electoral vote of 1992. The well-known historian, Tom Segev, viewed this dispassionately as the departure of the traditional Left from the Israeli political stage.

Thirdly, Avoda and Meretz are no longer the leading representatives of the peace camp. Losing this prominent role to Kadima equalled a political sell-out. Today, Tzipi Livni, Kadima's chairwoman, emerges as the leader of the peace camp. It is from this perspective that voters view Kadima not only as a political alternative to Likud and other right-wing parties, but to Avoda and Meretz as well.

Another outcome of the election which further illustrates the rightward trend is the continuing political rise of Israel's ultra-nationalist politician Avigdor Lieberman and his Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel Our Home) Party which won 15 seats in the Knesset. Russia-born Lieberman, Israel's current Foreign Minister, whose negative atti-

tude towards the Arab minority in Israel (20% out of a total 7,5 Million inhabitants) has never been a secret, openly preaches political rigour in dealing with Palestinian and Arab neighbors. Comparable to European right-wing populists, he plays on sentiments of anxiety, uncertainty, insecurity and discrimination in order to stir nationalist and racist emotions. And the Israelis are of course unsettled: there's the nuclear threat from Iran, Hamas and Hezbollah ramping up their missilery, no solution to the Middle East conflict in sight, and increasing international criticism of Israel's politics. People always yearn for simple solutions and strong leadership in times of crises. Lieberman's pithy remarks serve these needs.

The last elections made it quite clear that Israel today is a split society with many shades of opinion. Tzipi Livni's Kadima Party's electoral success does reflect the desire and hope for lasting peace with the Palestinians and Arab neighbors by way of the two-state solution. At the same time, however, people are very much aware that the withdrawal from previously occupied territories, from Southern Lebanon in 2000, from the Gaza-Strip in 2005 have lead to more insecurity, missile attacks on Israel and new wars with Lebanon (2006) and Gaza (2009). And then there is the memory of the Second Intifada and its terror attacks that went on for years (2000-2005), an experience that all but dashed the high hopes of the Oslo Process. The foundation of the Oslo Process – territories in exchange for peace -, also the core element of Avoda's and Meretz' policy, is perceived by many Israelis as having completely failed. As a result, a growing number of voters tend to believe that a solution to the problems can not be achieved through dialogue and a willingness to compromise, but through military strength and political rigour. This is what lead to the right-wing victory. Left-wing parties are increasingly perceived as incapable of guaranteeing security and achieving peace with either Palestinians or Arab neighbors. So, the majority of the electorate gave their vote to those political powers that positioned themselves against dialogue, against a withdrawal from the West Bank and against the implementation of the two-state solution. The message of Netanyahu's election campaign was basically „No“: no to the division of Jerusalem; No to the two-state solution; No to a return of the Golan-Heights to Syria.

2. Avoda joins a right-wing government - the party is deeply divided

Given the serious defeat, and convinced that another government participation would continue to erode the party, leading Avoda representatives – among them Secretary-General Eitan Cabel, ex-chairman Amir Peretz and former Secretary-General Ophir Pines-Paz demanded that the party go into opposition in order to tackle the renewal of Avoda from there. Ehud Barak decided otherwise. Before the elections, Barak had ruled out going into coalition with a party that could not unequivocally declare its support for the two-state solution vis-à-vis the Palestinians – and thereby meant Netanyahu's Likud Party. After the elections, he clearly changed his position and entered negotiations with Netanyahu. On his own and ignoring all the party committees, he put together a three-member negotiating team led by Ofer Eini, the chairman of the Histadrut trade union umbrella organization, to parley with Likud. The leadership of the party was left in the dark about these coalition negotiations.

When the coalition agreement was announced, it was accompanied by vehement protests within the Labor Party. Leading Avoda delegates blamed Barak for acting on his own, claiming he had violated the principles of democracy as he had had no mandate for conducting negotiations with Likud. Barak justified his actions: „What is wrong with talking to Netanyahu? I have spoken to leading PLO terrorists. Is Netanyahu our country's worst enemy? The foreign- and defence policy challenges, the economic and social challenges facing Israel make it the Labor Party's duty to seriously examine Netanyahu's offers.“

The Labor Party's Central Committee was then convened to hold a special party conference to vote on the coalition agreement. Although the majority of the members present ended up voting in favour of the government coalition, the preceding debate had shown a deeply divided party. There were dramatic calls to go into opposition, because only there could the party regain its former strength. Full of emotion, coalition opponents warned Barak against joining forces with the right-wing parties, saying this constituted a sell-out of the party's fundamental values. When reproached for reducing the Labor Party to a left fig leaf in an otherwise right-wing government, Barak's reply was: „We have an obligation toward the Labor Party, but we are also responsible for the State of Israel, for peace and

security. The Labor Party is not a fig leaf, but a genuine counterweight to the right-wing parties.” He also argued that in order to protect workers’ interests and in order to effectively combat the international financial and economic crisis affecting Israel, Avoda must join the new government.

Histadrut-chairman, Ofer Eini, played an important part in the entire process. He was not only the leader of Barak’s team for the coalition negotiations but also his most important ally in the discussion within the party about joining the government. If Barak managed to achieve a clear majority for his approach at the party convention, it was thanks to Eini who had persuaded the trade-unionists to vote in favour of the coalition agreement. In his speech, Eini argued that the international financial and economic crisis made it necessary to cooperate with the Netanyahu government. This was the only way to save jobs and prevent neo-liberal approaches. And indeed, he got his way and made sure economic and social agreements to protect the workers’ interests were incorporated in the coalition agreement.

3. History repeats itself: Power at all costs?

Looking back, we see that it has been exactly eight years when Avoda found itself in a near identical situation. In February 2001, after the failed Camp David peace negotiations in the summer of 2000 and in the midst of the Second Intifada, Ehud Barak suffered a painful defeat against Likud chairman Ariel Sharon in an early direct election for the office of Prime Minister. Sharon invited the Labor Party, which held 26 seats and thus continued to be the strongest faction in the Knesset, to jointly form a government of national unity. At the ensuing Labor Party convention, which resulted in a 66% majority coming out in favour of a joint government, heated discussions had taken place, stunningly reminiscent of those in the spring of 2009.

Shimon Peres, who was offered the office of Foreign Minister by Sharon, had persuaded the 2001 convention delegates with the argument that only an Avoda government participation would speed up the Oslo Process and bring peace within reach. After the vote he said: „Now the nation has a chance to find peace and the party has a chance to tackle its renewal. This party will not stop existing.” With these words, the 77-year old Peres practically took over the helm from Ehud

Barak, who stepped down from public office following the electoral defeat.

A considerable number of leading politicians spoke out vigorously against the move. Peres’ opponents resolutely voiced the opinion that the party would continue to lose political weight and claimed Sharon would only use the Labor Party as a fig leaf to shipwreck the peace process while maintaining international legitimacy. Shlomo Ben-Ami, Foreign Minister in the Barak government, and Yossi Beilin were the decision’s most vigorous opponents. At the party convention, Ben-Ami said the Labor Party was paving the way for its own „clinical death”, adding he could not stand to see the way the party tenders itself to Sharon.

Two identical constellations, with both times the Party and its leader making identical decisions: Shimon Peres gathered the majority behind him at the 2001 party convention, joined the Sharon government and became Foreign Minister. Ehud Barak managed to achieve a clear majority at the 2009 party convention, joined the Netanyahu government and became Defence Minister. Both men opted for a participation in power and against the alternative of going into opposition. Both men promised to do their utmost to renew the party and help it regain its former strength. Shimon Peres never took practical steps to that effect. Instead, over the years, he led the party - as a junior partner - into more government coalitions. As a result, the number of Knesset mandates slipped from 26 to 19 at the 2003 elections. In November 2005, after he was defeated for the office of party chairman by Amir Peretz, Shimon Peres resigned from the Labor Party to join the Kadima Party, which had just been founded by Ariel Sharon.

So far, nothing suggests that Ehud Barak is more successful than Shimon Peres in his efforts to renew and reinvigorate the party. He took over the party leadership from Amir Peretz in 2007, when the latter stepped down from office in the wake of the Second Lebanon War. Under the presidency of Barak, the number of seats in the Knesset dropped drastically again in 2009 - from 19 seats, won in both the 2003 and 2006 elections - to a mere 13. Despite these poor results and a painfully weakened party, Barak saw no reason to depart from his path. He did not stop to consider neither the causes of the crushing defeat, nor the impact of the party’s loss of significance. Nor did he and party committees seek to establish a strategy to tackle the party’s renewal. Instead, Barak reverted to business as

usual, joined the Netanyahu government and again took the office of Defence Minister, the same post he had held in the previous government, under Ehud Olmert. Obviously, the party leadership fails to recognise that what is at risk is its most fundamental political asset: its credibility.

To the external observer, this deterioration of the party that founded the State of Israel and fundamentally shaped it, is a political decline in quick-motion apparatus to which public opinion responds with emotional anguish and disbelief. After the 2009 elections, well-known journalist Yossi Verter made the following comments in the daily newspaper *Haaretz*: "From one election to the next, the party has weakened; its fundamental values have faded and its leaders have fallen like a line of animals in a shooting gallery. What remains is a thirst for power at any price. The party lost 31 seats in the Knesset in only 17 years, and not once did it ask itself what went wrong."

4. Barak and his opponents within the party

Although at the party convention, Ehud Barak managed to secure a majority vote for government participation, ever since, advocates and opponents of his approach have irreconcilably confronted each other. The Labor Party's Knesset faction is also split. Five of its 13 MKs opposed an alliance with the right-wingers. Of the remaining eight, seven are now in the government, five as minister and two as vice minister. Although they were present at the vote on the new government, Barak's opponents did not participate.

Four senior Labor Party officials - Eitan Cabel, Amir Peretz, Yuli Tamir and Ophir Pines-Paz – rebelled against their party's decision to join the coalition and formed an anti-Barak alliance. The "Rebels" as they were now called were seriously considering leaving the Avoda faction and forming a breakaway faction. A new faction was never formed because it would have had to include at least a third of the party's MKs in order to qualify for funding and other benefits. Since Labor has 13 MKs that means five would have been needed for a split. However, the four party "Rebels" were never joined by a fifth one.

From now on Barak sought to whip manifest opponents into line. First, he dismissed Secretary-General Eitan Cabel, who had frequently openly criticized the

party chairman. Cabel was replaced by Weizman Shiri. In an ensuing Army Radio interview Amir Peretz mentioned a "purge" within the party to rid it of its wayward members, adding Barak was a "dictator". Tembers were running high. In an interview with the press in June 2009, newly appointed Secretary-General Weizman Shri delivered an unprecedented attack on the four "Rebels" accusing them of being political hacks, guided by their personal, self-centered agenda. He further accused Yuli Tamir, co-founder of „Peace Now" and a minister in several governments of being a hypocrite, to which she replied: "It's no wonder that Barak hired a pathetic mercenary to run his ideological wars for him. He's afraid to do it himself."

After Cabel's dismissal and Shiri's nomination, Barak's went on to propose amendments to the party constitution. To this end a party convention was called on August 5th, 2009. Its circa 1,600 members were invited primarily to vote on a highly controversial item on the agenda: setting the date for the next internal election. According to Labor's constitution, party leadership elections must be held within 14 months of a loss in general elections. Barak, however, managed to strike a deal which stipulated that the party's next leadership elections would only be held in 2012, three years after the general election. Despite the party's crushing defeat under his leadership at the elections in February 2009, he was not held accountable for the party's deteriorating situation. Instead, the vote was a triumph for Barak. As a result of the weakening of the political weight of the Secretary-General, enshrined in the new Statute, and the reform of party committees and of decision-making and leadership structures within the party, Barak significantly increased his position as party chairman.

Barak ensured a large majority for changing the constitution and managed to isolate his opponents within the party. The latter accused him of being unwilling to resolve disputes democratically, of determining the lines of policy in a dictatorial way. But Barak in his speech replied that the changes in the constitution were necessary for its rehabilitation. He added that apart from being vital for the party's recovery, the changes that the convention approved gave its leadership more freedom of action, compared to the previous constitution which was full of contradictions. He described the party as being alive and kicking and called for unity. He said he had no doubts the Labor Party would win the next elections.

Barak's call for unity within the Labor Party did not put an end to the violent disputes and clashes, even after the new party constitution was voted on. Barak argued that while his opponents are entitled the right to have their dissenting opinions, they nonetheless must accept the conventions authority. His party opponents claimed that Barak undermined the basic values of the party and its democratic principles, adding that they would not stand by and watch. The "Rebels" and those who sided with them did not abate. They openly criticized Barak and, when votes were to be taken in the Knesset, they sometimes followed a political line different to that of the party chairman or of the government coalition. Consequently, they were occasionally suspended from the right of proposal, or denied speaking time. Shelly Yachimovich and Ophir Pines-Paz publicly objected to this treatment of MKs, whose task entrusted to them by their voters, they said, is to act true to the party's fundamental values and in accordance with their conscience.

To provide a platform for the internal opposition camp, the "Rebels", on November 8th, 2009, established the "Democratic Forum". MK Daniel Ben-Simon supported the initiative, but was reluctant to join the "Rebels" as their fifth member. If he had, the "Rebels" would have been legally able to break away from Labor, because they would have been the right number – one third of the total number in the faction, five out of 13 - to actually establish a new faction. The conference attracted about 300 Labor activists. The whole idea was to establish a political platform within the Labor Party with a view to providing alternatives to Barak's political line. At the event, Ophir Pines-Paz said: "We are here to rescue the Party. Rabin's path is no longer continued. Everyone is talking about peace, but peace has become an empty word. As a member of the coalition, we are supporting Israel's right-wing. We are treated like a ghost at the feast. There is no doubt we need to carve a new path for Avoda. We can grow from without or from within. The democratic forum is the means to that end." Eitan Cabel, staunch critic of Barak's political line added: „The Labor Party is no longer an alternative. The Labor Party is dead.”

The November meeting turned out to be the one and only gathering of the "Democratic Forum". The "Rebels" and those who sided with them failed to agree on a common strategy and a common new path. They even held divergent views as to who would be their leader or spokesman. Meanwhile Pines-Paz, who had

been a party member for decades, has withdrawn from politics and so did Yuli Tamir. She is now heading a college. Both Eitan Cabel and Amir Peretz have abandoned their resistance against the party chairman. When Amir Peretz was asked if he and Eitan Cabel returned to the ranks, their tail between their legs, he replied in an interview with *Haaretz* on March 10th, 2010: „We were waiting for the opportunity to build a new party. There are hundreds of thousands of homeless voters between Kadima and Meretz because the moment Barak put Labor to the right of Kadima, he left an entire public without a political home. The public still has reservations about voting for Kadima, so we hoped to set up a party to fill that need. Right now, it is our goal to try to pull the party from the coalition. We want to create a new alternative camp with clear positions, without double standards and replace Barak as chairman.”

5. Double Standards in Labor's policy?

Not only Amir Peretz and his fellow "Rebels" condemn Ehud Barak's and the government's Labor ministers' double standards in Labor's political praxis and their conduct when it comes to votes in the Israeli cabinet and in the Knesset. The gulf between political public statements on the one hand and government action on the other, have led key representatives of public opinion, influential journalists and well-known academics to share the "Rebels'" assessment. Meanwhile a large number of Israelis are of the opinion there is indeed a wide gap between word and deed in Labor's policy.

Ehud Barak's main argument for entering the right-wing coalition was that only as a coalition partner, Labor would be in a position to keep negotiating for peace and security. Without Labor's government participation there would be more insecurity, terror and confrontation. As Defence Minister and virtually foreign minister – since Arab and Muslim states refuse to negotiate with Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, on the grounds of his anti-Arab and right-wing extremist positions – Ehud Barak is Benjamin Netanyahu's partner in the duet that shapes Israel's foreign and defence political line. He therefore has extensive possibilities to put his stamp on Israeli politics and on the peace process.

He has not yet been able to show more than limited tangible results, however. Barak keeps emphasising that when Netanyahu in June 2009, in his speech at Bar-Ilan

University, for the first time, endorsed the two-state solution, this was largely due to Labor's active participation in the government. Yet, this often quoted speech has not been followed up by specific political steps, rather the opposite. The government continues to support ongoing settlement building in and around East Jerusalem, and the peace process with the Palestinians has reached deadlock. Despite proximity talks conducted since May 2010, a solution to the conflict seems to have receded further into the distance. Israel's relationship to the United States, the country's most important ally has been in a state of crisis for months. Following the Gaza-bound flotilla incident, the international community once again voiced strong criticism against Israel's political measures. The incident - for which Israelis put most of the blame on Ehud Barak – has also increased the political isolation of the country. Turkey, from a strategic point of view, the only ally in the region, in the person of its prime minister, Mr Erdogan, has come to vehemently criticize Israel. All of this can hardly be described as a political record of success.

Apart from the statements about dialogue and peace they make on the broader political stage – in meetings with Barack Obama, Angela Merkel, Mahmud Abbas or George Mitchell -, it is revealing to take a closer look at Labor representatives in their political daily routine, and observe their cabinet and Knesset voting behaviour in order to better assess their political effect. Three specific examples must be mentioned here:

First there is the so-called Referendum-Bill: On December 9, 2009, the Knesset voted to advance legislation requiring that Israel's territorial withdrawal from the Golan-Heights pass a national referendum. A move - initiated by the political right-wing and supported by the Labor ministers - which again raises the hurdles for peace between Israel and Syria, for it is common knowledge that many Israelis have come to regard the Golan-Heights as Israeli territory and that there is strong popular resistance to a withdrawal. Israel captured the Golan-Heights from Syria in the 1967 Six-Day War and in 1981 effectively annexed it, contrary to international law. Ehud Barak, when asked why he had approved the motion calling for a referendum, replied that he in fact did not intend to. It would only put unnecessary pressure on the Israeli Prime Minister, if he should enter negotiations with Syria. Another reason why he is in fact not willing to lend approval to the motion is that it would send a wrong signal of Israel thwarting efforts towards peace. And he is against referenda anyway

because they go against the principles of parliamentary democracy. He did end up supporting the motion because Meretz turned it into vote of no confidence against the government.

Secondly there is the list of national priorities Israel's cabinet approved on December 13. The government drew up this national priority list to provide infrastructures and additional funding in dozens of West Bank settlements, including four "illegal" ones (in the eyes of the wider international community, the entire Israeli occupation of the West Bank is contrary to international law, but the outposts are also considered illegal according to Israeli law.) The press reported that Barak was initially prepared to approve the list. When Eitan Cabel and Ophir Pinez-Paz made this publicly known, there was vehement protest. Barak and the four other Labor ministers then voted against the move. The vote ended 21 in favour to five against, with the cabinet adopting the plan.

Thirdly there is a decision Ehud Barak took on an academic issue in his capacity as Defence Minister. His ministry has jurisdiction in the occupied West Bank, and in January 2010, Barak decreed that the Ariel College in the West Bank would be turned into a university center. Israeli universities receive more money than colleges. According to the press, the upgrade of Ariel College was one of the articles of the coalition agreement between Netanyahu and Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu. The Higher Education Council, Israel's education oversight body, opposed the college's upgrade to university status arguing that the criteria for such an upgrade had not been met. Therefore, the Council refused to acknowledge the decision.

What adds to Ehud Barak's adverse balance is that the number of settlement outposts in the West Bank has not grown smaller ever since he became Defence Minister. Although he does confirm that the outposts are illegal by Israeli law as well and should be evacuated, with the exception of a few, they haven't been. So all in all, even under Barak, the policy of tacit approval with regard to settlement outposts has remained unchanged.

Left-wing politicians and journalists are particularly hard on Barak. Yossi Sarid, former Meretz chairman and Minister of Education argues that in upgrading Ariel College to university status, Barak and Avoda are legitimizing and reinforcing the occupation of the West

Bank. Journalist Avirama Golan is even more explicit and says: "He is signing a freeze order with one hand and approving budgets with the other."

As far as domestic politics is concerned, the above examples illustrate to what extent the peace process and two-state solution are more hindered than promoted by Barak's political actions, for time and again concessions are made to the settlers and right-wing forces. Ehud Barak must be judged by his own statements. In his speech at the Herzliya conference on February 3rd, 2010, he left no doubt as to the fact that Israel has no alternative to the two-state solution. He said: „As long as there is only one political entity called Israel, it is going to be either non-Jewish, or non-democratic. If this bloc of millions of Palestinians cannot vote, that will be the end of Israel as a Jewish state. It will be an apartheid state, a new South Africa or Rhodesia. Only a territorial compromise with the Palestinians can ensure a Jewish majority in Israel.“

Barak's analysis of the situation is clear and to the point. But do the deeds of Israel's most prominent politician aside from Prime Minister Netanyahu, concord with the wording of his analysis? On March 9th 2010, the municipal authority of Jerusalem announced that it had given final approval to the construction of an additional 1,600 apartments in Ramat Shlomo, a large Jewish housing development in East Jerusalem. (From an Israeli point of view, the development is within the designated borders of Jerusalem, from a Palestinian viewpoint it is part of the West Bank). The announcement occurred during a visit by U.S. Vice President Joe Biden who had come to Israel to announce U.S. mediated indirect "proximity talks" - intended to revive the peace process between Israelis and Palestinians. Obviously, the construction plan was strongly condemned by the international community and raised tensions between Israel and the U.S.

Eli Yishai, Interior Minister and chairman of the ultra-Orthodox Shas Party, had commented the move as follows: "I thank God I have been given the opportunity to be the minister who approves the construction of thousands of housing units in Jerusalem." Neither Ehud Barak nor any of the other Labor ministers perceptibly distanced themselves from the Jerusalem municipal authority or fellow minister Eli Yishai. One may well ask where the Labor Party draws the line of what is politically acceptable. Looking at Eli Yishai's unambiguous statement and the silence of the Avoda ministers, one

may wonder, does such a line exist at all? And if, it must be a hardly noticeable one. When Ophir Pines-Paz announced he was withdrawing from political life in January 2010, he referred to this alarming problem and the doubts it casts on the party's political credibility: „There are governments one should not join, and there are governments one must get out of. The Labor Party does not learn this lesson. That is its biggest problem, wanting to be part of the government, at all cost.“

Given the stagnation or even regression in the peace process, the worsened strategic situation of Israel (crisis with the U.S., conflict with Turkey, growing international isolation) and the way things are developing within the coalition and the political results obtained there, Labor must ask itself whether the party has indeed come closer to the objectives it had stated when joining the Netanyahu government: furthering the peace process as well as the stability and security of the State of Israel. Or did Netanyahu perhaps succeed in creating a fig leaf to conceal his right-wing government and cunningly used Avoda to further slow down the peace process?

There have as yet been no definite decisions or actions towards the two-state solution on his behalf. In giving his rhetorical support to the two-state solution and to a settlement freeze – be it with many exceptions – on the West Bank, the experienced tactician Netanyahu succeeded in keeping Labor in his government, stabilising his power and maintaining the status quo. The events that followed Israel's attack on the Gaza aid convoy of May 31st, 2010, are practical consequences of Netanyahu's strategies. His policy is not conducive to progress in the peace process but rather to rising tensions in the region and a deterioration of Israel's strategic sphere.

6. 25.09.2010 – End or continuation of the settlement freeze?

Against this backdrop, the debates within a deeply divided Labor Party about Ehud Barak's policy continue. Social Affairs Minister Herzog and Minister of Minorities Avishai Braverman no longer make a secret of their disagreement with Barak over many issues and have already signalled leadership ambitions. Isaac Herzog in particular, has already announced his ambition to run for party chairman against Barak. While neither Herzog nor Braverman joined the "Rebels", they both sympathised with them and showed understanding for their

positions. They too are well aware of the deep crisis in the party. In an interview on March, 22nd, 2010, Isaac Herzog said: "Labor can recover from the crisis and first and foremost has to shake up its values. The party must drop the double talk and adopt a clear and straightforward position. It has good people and the capability to do this, but this requires a shake-up of its values and objectives, and at the end of the process also a discussion about its leadership."

MK Shelly Yachimovich is another of Barak's inner-party critics. She is also positioning herself as a candidate for a new party leadership. The party chairman's loyal allies, Minister of Industry and Labour, Benjamin Ben-Eliezer and Minister of Agriculture, Shalom Simhon apparently have other ambitions. Ben-Eliezer is said to be keen on taking over the Presidency from Shimon Peres and Simhon has applied for the position as chairman of the prestigious Jewish National Fund. Moreover, there is apparently increasingly discordance of opinion between Ben-Eliezer and Barak. Should these differences last and should Ben-Eliezer end up joining the camp of Barak opponents, it will be hard for Barak to defend his leadership position. Ben-Eliezer was party chairman and Defence Minister from 2001 to 2002. He is described as an institution in the Labor Party and as someone who knows every trick in the book of politics.

An important date in this process is September 25th, 2010. It is the date that marks the end of the 10-month halt in construction in West Bank settlements that was agreed upon on November 25th, 2009. In the event that construction should resume and the Netanyahu government should fail to show serious initiatives in the peace process by that time, both Herzog and Braverman have hinted at leaving the coalition and pursuing a new political line with Avoda. In the interview cited above, Herzog also said: "The diplomatic issue is the main thing keeping us in the government, because we have a genuine wish to reach a breakthrough with the Palestinians and the Syrians. And we see the possibility of ending this partnership if there is no change of direction in the following months. The approaching moment of truth, when we have to ask ourselves if we can continue with this partnership, will undoubtedly be in September, at the end of the construction freeze."

In the meantime Barak does not remain idle, for he knows very well that this moment of truth is likely to imply the end of his government participation with Netanyahu and the beginning of a struggle for political

leadership of the Labor Party. Therefore, he is trying to get Netanyahu to take decisive steps in the peace process, whether with Palestinians or Syrians, and he is hoping for support from the White House. However, when President Obama and Benjamin Netanyahu met in Washington on July 6th, 2010, there was no other agreement reached but that Israel would take confidence-building measures with the Palestinian Authority. That does not sound very precise and will hardly strengthen Barak's position. In order to achieve that, far more energetic steps on the part of Netanyahu are needed. If the latter were to resume direct peace talks, Barak could attribute this success to his own political strategy of government participation. If, on the other hand, the deadlock in the peace process can not be broken, things are going to get tougher for Barak.

Such a move by Netanyahu, while it can not be excluded, is not very likely. And since it would irrevocably lead to a break-up of the right-wing coalition, Barak is seeking pledges from Tzipi Livni to join the government. This would be another government of national unity (Likud, Kadima, Avoda) with 68 mandates. At the moment, Tzipi Livni sees no need for action in this direction. To the contrary, she is a staunch critic of both Netanyahu and Barak. Israel's daily newspaper *Yedioth Ahronot* reports on its internet platform, that on June 28th, she addressed the Kadima faction in the Knesset with the words: "Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defence Minister Ehud Barak are ruining our country. They are taking us from one crisis to another and are leading Israel to one of the worst situations in its history. Israel is in trouble, not because the whole world is against us, but rather, because of the problematic policy represented by this government. In order to save the state, we need to replace them and the policy they represent. The solution is to replace the leadership and save the country, rather than saving the government."

7. Meretz – a paralyzed party

Labor with its struggle for leadership, identity issues and quest for its basic values, is a party divided against itself. At the same time, it wants to have the power to act in a right-wing government. Meretz on the other hand, can concentrate fully on the analysis of its own party situation and consider how to proceed along new and progressive lines.

Meretz' defeat at the elections was as crushing as was Avoda's. The party had set itself high standards and

had entered the campaign with high expectations. Meretz had presented itself on a joint list with the new leftist alternative "New Movement" - founded in November 2008 - as a new social democratic left and a political alternative to Labor. On November 16th, 2008, Amos Oz told the press: "The Labor Party has finished its historic role, it isn't putting forward a national agenda and it joins any coalition."

The dismal electoral result - only three seats instead of the aspired double-digit number – was a complete shock to Meretz' party members and its supporters. The new coalition had not attracted more voters, far from it. It had split the left-wing vote but did not strengthen the joint list. During the electoral campaign "The New Movement - Meretz", which is the official name of the joint list, had initially supported the Israeli army's Gaza military operation. As the number of civilian fatalities increased, Meretz distanced itself from that operation and demanded it to be stopped. However, the initial support turned out to have been a serious mistake. To vigorous opponents of the military operation, Meretz was no longer a valid political alternative.

The irrelevance of its own campaign issues, compared to the absolutely dominant security issue, further explains the whipping following the Gaza war. What is more, many Meretz voters – and the same applies to a large number of voters with traditional Avoda ties – wanted to prevent a Netanyahu victory by casting their vote for Kadima. Moreover, they meanwhile hold Tzipi Livni in esteem as the politically more effective, leading representative of the peace camp. The electoral results reduced Meretz to an all but politically irrelevant miniature party.

In the run-up to important decisions, Ehud Barak does not stop to ask himself fundamental questions about his party's situation, but instead invokes its national responsibility. And as for himself, he continues to act as Defence Minister virtually without interruption. Meretz chairman, Chaim Oron, on the other hand, appointed an independent committee of enquiry. Under the supervision of political scientist Professor Tamar Hermann, the committee was commissioned to analyze the party's current situation and put forward recommendations for its future strategy.

In its report, the committee recommended adopting a "niche party" strategy, having considered two options. *Firstly* that Meretz sharpens its own profile in order to

preserve its existence as an independent political party. *Secondly* that Meretz join forces with one or more other parties, possibly Avoda, Hadash or Kadima. Meretz' lack of political heft was explained by the fact that the party is insufficiently anchored in entire segments of Israeli society, in the Russian community, among Israeli Arabs and the religious moderates. As a result, Meretz was considered a leftist party without hardly any connection to the socially weak, but instead a party of the educated, Ashkenazi (of Eastern European descent) and prosperous urban middle class and - though far less than in the past – the Kibbutz Movement.

As a reminder: Meretz or its precursor Mapam was the first Zionist party to stand up for a just peace with the Palestinians and support the idea of a sovereign Palestinian state in the occupied territories. Following Yitzhak Rabin's electoral victory in 1992, Meretz joined his government with 12 seats in the Knesset and had an active role in shaping the Oslo Process.

It remains to be seen whether Meretz will continue to exist as a party, or whether its representatives will opt to join forces with other leftists, or perhaps opt to change to Kadima. The latter option is the less likely one. Meretz has been in a state of paralyzation ever since the elections, virtually in a state of shock, but despite the dismal results and the lingering crisis, there are no struggles for power within the party. Its chairman Chaim Oron, who succeeded Yossi Beilin in 2008, is considered a man of integrity and a competent politician. So far, though, he has not succeeded in giving fresh impetus to his party's strategy or open up new perspectives.

8. The Leftists' narrowing social basis

Avoda has traditionally been a middle- and upper class party, also well positioned in the trade union and the Kibbutz movement, from which the country and Avoda for many years recruited part of their political and military elite. But over the years, the once very influential trade union movement has lost its political heft, and the Kibbutz movement has almost entirely discarded its socialist Zionist character.

At the same time, the party is not successful in trying to capture the votes of the socially weak. It has hardly any influence among those groups, in particular among the religious moderates, the Mizrahim (immigrants from

Northern Africa and the Middle East) and the ultra-Orthodox. But neither does it seem to appeal to the close to one million immigrants from the former Soviet Union. They constitute about 17% of the Israeli electorate, which corresponds to about 20 out of a total of 120 Knesset seats. Due to their experience in the Soviet Union, the majority of these immigrants is against leftist positions and, on the basis of their being raised in an authoritarian soviet society, they tend to lean towards parties that embody those values, e.g. Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu. This section of the population gave Avoda less than one mandate at the 2009 elections. But what is particularly painful is the very poor political support from the Israeli Arabs, who constitute nonetheless 20 % of the total population (1,5 million out of 7,5 million inhabitants). In 1992, 20% of the Israeli Arabs eligible to vote had cast their vote for the Labor Party, compared to a mere 4.3% in 2009. It must be said, though, that over the course of the conflict in the Middle East (Intifada, Lebanon War, Gaza War) all Zionist parties drastically lost support from the Israeli Arabs. The figures also demonstrate what is achievable when there is consistency in the policy of peace – as under Yitzhak Rabin.

Meanwhile it is essential for the Labor Party to restore the middle classes' confidence in its policies. It is the mainstream of society whose political support Kadima and Likud too, the two largest and politically most successful parties, are soliciting. And it is here that Avoda over the past few years has continued to lose support on the grounds of its above mentioned political strategies.

Another evidence of this development is the total number of party members. One has to be very careful citing the numbers in circulation, however. At the Avoda primaries in the summer of 2005, there was a huge scandal over wrong member numbers. Meanwhile, according to press reports, the party has about 30,000 members left. At the December 2008 primaries, according to its own data, the party numbered 60,000 members. If these figures are roughly correct, this would imply that the members are running away from the party. Deserting the sinking ship?

9. The Left is politically speechless

A truly worrying symptom of the current crisis within the Israeli left-wing is its political speechlessness. Hardly anyone is undertaking serious action to systematically

find out how the current situation should be assessed and can be improved - with the exception of Meretz who at least appointed a committee to this end. While the political sections in the press keep producing new opinions and comments, they tend to "review", or stop at the symptoms - and do not dig for the causes. Leading politicians such as Isaac Herzog and Ophir Pines-Paz do make accurate diagnoses, which remain without political consequences, however. Then, there are those who play the common political game of trying out new constellations of people and relations in the establishing of a new party. And then, there are others who simply carry on undeterred, apparently hoping to change the course of the – still sinking – ship thanks to some unexpected success in the Middle East peace process. Finally, let's not forget those who are attempting to manage both the situation of shock and the daily political routine at the same time. No very optimistic prospects!

It is in precisely this situation that a substantial left-wing shortcoming is making itself felt. The Left has neither think tanks nor comparable institutions that come up with ideas, outline concepts and develop political strategies. Full of envy, one looks to the U.S. and dreams of an Israeli equivalent to the CAP, the Center for American Progress, and other think tanks which undertook the essential intellectual preparatory work for Barack Obama and his policy, and continue to do much of the leg-work. It is not even necessary to look that far. There are successful examples closer to home, at home, in fact. The Israeli right-wing does have well-functioning institutions that do the preparatory work for them. To name but the Shalem Center Jerusalem and the IDC Herzliya Conference (Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya), which are doing an excellent job in that area. When Benjamin Netanyahu took office on March 31st, 2009, he was very well prepared to begin the implementation of his political objectives. The left-wing can learn from Netanyahu in other respects too: when Ariel Sharon and his supporters, in the autumn of 2005, left Likud in order to found Kadima, jointly with representatives of the Labor Party, Netanyahu was left with a shrunk Knesset faction. In the elections of March 2006, Likud, under Netanyahu's leadership, only won 12 mandates. But in this situation, Netanyahu proved to have stamina. He went into opposition, restructured his party and redefined its focus, put forward a clear political right-wing alternative and only three years later – in February 2009 - won as many as 27 Knesset seats.

The Israeli left-wing does not have anything comparable to the Shalem Center or the Herzliya Conference at their disposal. But there is the Berl-Katzenelson-Foundation, an institution with close ties to Labor, that could be an ideal partner for the task. Provided, of course, Labor first develops an awareness for the existing problems – the urgent need for conceptional preparatory work, for establishing its own political voice – then, develops the political will to adopt fundamental changes and finally, provides the financial and human resources needed to create its own think tank. That is, however, not the case.

Add to this, that momentarily, there are not that many truly creative politicians who, with a view to the problems and challenges currently facing Israel, are developing new concepts for the political left-wing. And are closely monitoring the debates and developments in the European social-democratic parties and American Democratic Party and including them in their considerations. One of the few left-wing Israeli politicians who was able to do this and indeed did, was Yossi Beilin, the man behind the Geneva initiative. When in 2001, after Labor had joined the Sharon government, he came to the conclusion that a social democratic policy was not longer possible with this party, he designed a new political strategy. Beilin left Labor, founded Meretz-Yachad in 2004 and prepared a comprehensive and coherent political programme for the new party. He started looking for allies, people with the same ideas and the same goals, and tried to implement them. That it did not necessarily work, is another matter.

Amir Peretz too – despite a later misjudgement as Defence Minister – has largely proven that safeguarding social democratic values and contents, and maintaining a convincing and coherent political agenda pave the way for success. With a view to the 2006 Knesset elections, he presented an economic and socio-political programme based on social democratic principles, which successfully passed the test. Indeed, he succeeded in putting a halt to Labor's downward trend and managed to retain the 19 mandates won in the 2003 elections, and as such helped assure the party's stability.

A left-wing alternative political strategy with conceptional substance and realistic approaches is not yet in sight. Perhaps with the exception of a contribution that continues to be a challenging topic of discussion, though rejected and ridiculed by leading left-wing

politicians. Reference is made to "The National Left", a manifesto Eldad Yaniv and Schmu'el Hasfari publicly presented in September 2009. The core elements in their analysis are: the Left died the day the Six-Day War ended. It died because it stopped dreaming of changing the world. The Left today is weak, exhausted and unpatriotic, only supported by members of the elite and by the wealthy. What remains of the Left is a caricature, which is why "Left" is a four-letter word in Israel today. The Left has lost touch with what is of national interest and left this to the right-wingers. In order to be truly left, the Left must incorporate the national element as crucial to its policy.

In the view of Yaniv and Hasfari, the reconquest of the national is a prerequisite for the future of the Israeli Left. This is the perspective from which they approach the main political and societal topics, such as the Middle East conflict, the relations with Arabs in Israel, poverty and lack of social justice, the settlement project, Jewish identity, ethics and morals in politics and in the society, solidarity, Zionism. However, their economic, social and societal designs seem outdated when considering the current level of knowledge and experience - rather like a copy of the social-Zionist ideas of David Ben-Gurion carried over to the present. Yaniv and Hasfari believe that setting an example, taking responsibility and being modest are the ethical foundation pillars of an anti-capitalist society. Their perception of society seems disconnected from modern 21st-century society, and they are obviously not familiar with the ongoing debates on these topics in the international social democracy.

10. Will Tzipi Livni rescue the Left?

At the moment, it is hardly foreseeable in what direction Israel's center-left political terrain is going to develop. It is anybody's guess as to whether Labor and Meretz will succeed in consolidating and realigning themselves, and develop new political strengths. Should this not work – which is the majority opinion in the wider society and within the left camp – there are two fundamental options: either a new left party or movement is founded (with representatives of Avoda, Meretz and the Green Party switching to that party), or Kadima – opening the door to politicians from the traditionally left parties - evolves as a center-left party, incorporating into its politics the objectives of the social democratic movement and a commitment to a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian and Arab-Israeli conflicts. Thus

Kadima would emerge as a true political alternative to a Likud led right-wing camp.

At the moment, the Kadima option is not much more than a considerable number of - in particular young - leftists indulging in wishful thinking. They view Kadima as a genuine alternative to the existing left-wing. But, despite her clear endorsement of the two-state solution, Tzipi Livni is a politician of neither left nor center-left and she has not yet indicated wanting to move toward a social democratic agenda. This does not stop individual Kadima representatives from calling themselves social democrats. Kadima has a confirmed right-wing, though, with its representatives adopting positions that differ very little from the Netanyahu government's policy. Only the withdrawal from the party of this wing, led by former Chief of the General Staff, Shaul Mofaz, could significantly change the face of Kadima.

Under the leadership of Tzipi Livni, Kadima is a centrist party that commits itself to the two-state solution, but takes a more liberal stand on social and economic issues. The party is successful in the political center and is not likely to move away from it. It would certainly be a political error. Apart from its unambiguous positioning in the peace process, Kadima does not yet have a clearly defined political programme. Its leader, Tzipi Livni, joined Kadima from the Likud, and this right-wing socialisation has shaped her political profile. Her ardent supporter, Ariel Sharon, fostered her and made her minister. While she is a leading voice for the two-state solution, she does not adopt social democratic positions in other areas of politics. Socialist ideas are completely alien to her. As a result of her manifest opposition to Benjamin Netanyahu's policy, however, she is regarded as the leader of the peace camp in Israel. Obviously, those who have been bitterly disappointed by Ehud Barak and Labor, and meanwhile view Meretz as politically irrelevant, project the values they hold dear onto Tzipi Livni. Since this perception - which does not necessarily reflect political reality - is shared by many Israelis, Kadima is viewed as center-left, although the party is in fact center-right, or centrist with a confirmed right-wing.

Tzipi Livni has earned a reputation as "clean" and incorruptible, and has never been involved in any scandals. That is why lots of people, especially young voters, give her their full confidence and see her as a new type of politician, guided by moral principles. She serves as

counter-example to that political crowd which is poisoned by corruption and clouded by scandals, with Ehud Barak ranking among them. It is also down to her that many women voted Kadima. Add to that the many voters with traditional ties to Avoda or Meretz who have come to regard her as the voice of their political visions. This explains why Kadima, in a very short period of time, has won a loyal community of supporters across the entire secular political spectrum.

But for all that, Tzipi Livni will not be able to rid the Left of their problems, nor will she want to. Neither will she be able to, or want to take on the task of realigning the Leftist political forces in Israel and write their new political agenda.

11. Conclusion

A speedy end to the crisis of the Israeli Left is not in sight. Both Avoda and Meretz currently lack the concepts and personalities necessary to move ahead with a restructuring and realigning of the party, and initiate a recovery of their political creative power and ability to take action. Labor resembles a ship, incapable to change its course, that is slowly but steadily sinking to the bottom of the ocean. Prospects of anyone setting the ship on a new course look bleak as long as the present leaders are at the helm. The outlook for Meretz is not less gloomy. The party resembles a boxer, who can not get back on his feet after a knock-out. Meretz is paralyzed and apparently lacks the strength to develop new perspectives. But one thing is true for both parties: Kadima or Tzipi Livni is not going to toss a lifebuoy in their direction. Kadima is politically successful as a centrist party and will stay in the political center.

Labor's biggest shortcoming is that for years the party and its leadership have not found the strength nor mustered the political will to seriously and systematically deal with the causes of the party's continuing decline. The party is in urgent need of an honest and critical political stocktaking with a view to its membership and political realignment. But instead of acting on the causes, the symptoms are fought. Instead of debates about policies, what is taking place are disputes about individuals and about the distribution of power.

It always ended with those politicians who crave power more than anything, getting their way, whilst the party was losing its profile, its political substance and its

credibility. Avoda failed to develop a clear and independent profile, be it in its peace policy - an area dominated by the political hawk, Ehud Barak -, or in its economic, social or societal policies. That is why today it is only partially right to label Avoda social democratic. The party lost its role as leading voice of the peace camp in Israel, and can no longer qualify as a political alternative to the right-wing Likud. Labor has not only lost its voters and supporters, but is being deserted by its members as well.

Unless this process is stopped in the near future, the scenario which is most likely is that the party disappears from the political scene or ends up as an irrelevant niche party. Its leftist members and supporters will then get together with Meretz and the Green Party representatives in a new partnership. A considerable number might well opt to join Kadima or even Likud.

Has the party arrived at the point of no return? Certainly not! Both within the party and among the Israeli Left a great number of people are in a position to fight, and prepared to fight for a renewal of the party to ensure its continued existence. They will achieve this by taking the following steps: 1) Restoring the party's credibility by following a clear political path; 2) Performing a critical analysis of the current situation and a restatement of its policies and objectives within the framework of and based on social democratic values; 3) Involving its own rank and file, and young people in particular, in the Labor Party's renewal; 4) Establishing an electoral process for the party leadership which involves the entire party.

The present domestic political situation and Israel's position in the international community both make it clear that the country is very much in need of a strong left-wing. As far as the domestic situation is concerned, the aim must be to defend Israeli democracy against

increasingly stronger right-wing forces. And as far as its foreign policy is concerned, the focus must be on a commitment to the two-state solution. Unless the center-left camp develops an enduring strength and the concepts necessary to operate a fully comprehensive canvas on which these developments can take place, the deadlock in the peace process will not be broken and this will lead to new tensions and aggravate existing conflicts.

Therefore, the Israeli Left is not only faced with the task of renewing itself from within, but is also faced with the challenge of forming a political alliance with the centrist forces. This is the only way to overcome the right-wing dominance in politics and the wider society.



About the Author

Dr. Ralf Hexel since 2008 Head of office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Herzliya/Israel

Imprint

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
Division Near/Middle East and North Africa
Hiroshima St. 28, 10785 Berlin

Responsible:
Hajo Lanz, Head of Division Near/Middle East and North Africa
Tel.: +49 (0)30 269 35 7421
Fax: +49 (0)30 269 35 9233
<http://www.fes.de/international/nahost>

Contact:
Helga.Reuter@fes.de