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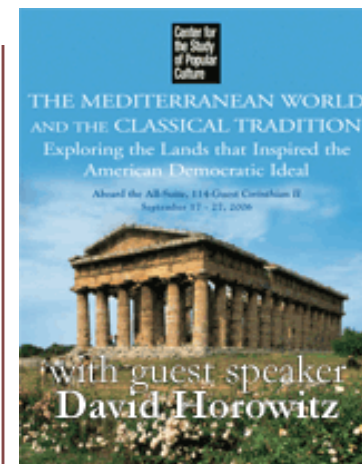
Letter from Israel: A Yearning for Normalcy

By [Fred Siegel](#)

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JERUSALEM -- It's hard to grasp from reading the American papers, but the biggest issue in this year's yawn of an Israeli election campaign is not security but social inequality. When I got a chance to talk with former Mossad Chief Danny Yatom, I expected to hear about terrorism. But Yatom, who is running for the Knesset on the Labor Party list, made it clear that his top priority was to close the widening income gap among Israelis by shifting money from the military to social spending, and by increased investment in the country's Arab villages. It was a message I heard time and again during my nine days in Israel as part of a trip sponsored by the American-Israel Friendship League.

The call for more social spending now ties the Labor left and the centrist Kadima party of Ehud Olmert together in opposition to Benjamin Netanyahu and the right-wing Likud Party. Some of this is a matter of political jujitsu. As Likud's finance minister, Netanyahu presided over both the revival of the country's high-tech industries and an improved budget situation. Israel now has more high-tech start ups than any other nation except the United States. One company we visited, Given technologies, has developed the first virtual colonoscopy. It's a pill with a miniature camera, originally produced by the military to guide missiles, which takes 6,000 pictures as it passes through the colon. But the wealth generated by the high-tech companies, combined with the cuts in social spending Netanyahu made to reduce Israel's sprawling budget deficit, has given his opponents a powerful political weapon. Given their sacrifices in

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the long war with Arab intransigence, all Israelis, it's argued, deserve a share of the good life.

Yet while the issue of social inequality and economic opportunity has come to the fore, the basic frame for the campaign remains the separation of Israel from Palestine. The yearning for a normal life -- defined as living without the incessant conflict with the Palestinians -- has remade Israel's political landscape. On my prior visit, just over a year ago, the hostilities between left and right, Labor and Likkud, still defined the country's political choices. But today, as the ideological fires of the past have been banked, Labor and Likkud are fighting for second place while Kadima, the party created by Ariel Sharon after the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza last August, is in the saddle. It is expected to form the next government after the March 28 parliamentary elections.

The support for Kadima (which means "forward" in Hebrew) is not a reflection of admiration for prime ministerial candidate Ehud Olmert, the not entirely likeable man who succeeded the comatose Ariel Sharon. Rather, it reflects the breadth and depth of the desire for separation from the Palestinians as the only plausible path to normalcy. Olmert has run on the idea that if Israel can complete the barriers between the West Bank and the Jewish state while withdrawing from isolated settlements, Israel will become, in his words, "a country that is fun to live in."

The influential intellectual Shlomo Avineri says the left tried the outstretched hand and the right tried the iron fist, but both failed. Likkud and Labor, want in oddly similar ways to continue engaging the Palestinians. Likkud was opposed to the unilateral withdrawal from Gaza, despite overwhelming popular support for disengagement. Netanyahu insisted Israel should only leave Gaza in return for a quid pro quo. When Sharon left Gaza unilaterally, he lost the support of Likkud but won the admiration of middle Israel. Labor continues to talk about negotiations, perhaps even with Hamas, but the public sees such efforts as foolish at best.

The consensus for separation is driven by two factors: There is the fear that Israel would lose its Jewish majority and thus its democracy if it held onto Arab territories. This has put an end to the right-wing dream of a greater Israel. On the other hand, the guilt on the left -- the sense that the Palestinians had been wronged, so evident during the first intifada -- has declined dramatically. One leftist told me it is hard to see anything but malevolence in the second intifada, which broke out as a way of rejecting the Clinton-Barak offer of a generous peace for the Palestinians. The lingering guilt that remained has been sharply diminished by the Hamas victory in the recent Palestinian elections.

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In a sense the current election is, as Ali Yahya, the first Israeli Arab to serve as an ambassador, explained, a ratification of what's already occurred. Since the second intifada began in 2000, Arabs and Israelis no longer know each other; the separation barrier merely acknowledges that reality.

The academics and writers for Israel's leading left-wing daily, *Haaretz*, continue to talk about mechanisms to bridge the differences between Israelis and Palestinians, but they are broadly dismissed, even mocked. Shabtai Shavit, another former head of Mossad -- a no-nonsense guy who speaks in measured tones and looks like he came out of central casting -- spoke, like virtually everyone we heard, without rancor about Palestinian terrorism. Israelis have lived with the problem of Palestinian violence for so long the issue is no longer raw; it's seen as an unpleasant fact of life. Terror, explained Shavit, is a problem that has to be handled; "you can't eliminate terror but you can contain it, manage the problem." That's a view widely shared by the Israeli public. A friend from Hadera, Israel's Peoria, agreed. Dismissive of the *Haaretz* types, he explained, "if the Arabs want to live in the distant past, there's nothing we can do about it." But what he did want was to be able to go the beach in peace on the weekend.

Olmert, following in Sharon's footsteps, has concluded that while he may not be able to make peace with the Arabs, he can, with the fence, give Israelis some peace of mind. It's a message that meets with intense approval from the Israeli public, which seems all but assured of giving Kadima a victory on March 28.

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