



Prime Time for Tzipi

Will a woman finally lead Israel to peace?

ISRAELI FOREIGN MINISTER Tzipi Livni has long made it clear: She did not enter politics to push a feminist agenda, but to help find a solution to the seemingly intractable Arab-Israeli conflict.

“But now I see that there is a connection between conflict resolution and empowering women,” Livni said in Vienna at the May 2007 conference *Women Leaders: Networking for Peace and Security in the Middle East*. She argued that women offer traits needed to resolve such conflict: the ability to explore common interests versus viewing conflict as a zero-sum game, the capacity to multitask as opposed to narrowly focusing on one strategy, and the tendency to show increased empathy for others’ suffering.

“The problem is that the perception of women and of the above-mentioned characteristics of dialogue is one of weakness,” said Livni, con-

sidered by many to be, potentially, the next prime minister of Israel. “We must change that by using our collective understanding and power. If we use these characteristics and achieve something successful, we can show that these traits are not weak traits.”

The future of Livni’s thus-far successful political career may depend on her ability to show precisely that. Her admirers are already convinced that the 49-year-old attorney, former Mossad intelligence agent and mother of two is just the leader Israel needs.

“It’s the best thing that can happen to us, because of her love of the country, her love of the people, her understanding, her ability to see the future [while] building on the past,” says Amira Dotan, a Knesset member who belongs to Livni’s centrist Kadima party. Livni, who rose quickly after entering politics in 1999, was named one of *Time* magazine’s 100 most influential people in 2007. In Israel she is hailed

as an intelligent, credible, scandal-free person who represents the popular political center with integrity.

But if the ambitious Livni is to have a chance at becoming Israel’s first woman prime minister since Golda Meir—she’s already followed Meir’s footsteps in becoming the country’s second-ever woman foreign minister—she may have to toughen up her image. “She’s not seen as a strong personality,” says political science and communications professor Gadi Wolfsfeld of Hebrew University of Jerusalem. “Israelis have a lot of respect for tough leaders.”

Part of this perception stems from the aftermath of Livni’s decision to call for Prime Minister Ehud Olmert’s resignation following the release of a scathing government report on the handling of Israel’s 2006 war with Hezbollah in Lebanon. When Olmert refused to step down, Livni chose to keep her post rather

RONNEN ZVULUN/EPA/CORBIS

◀ Israeli foreign minister Tzipi Livni arrives at a Cabinet meeting in Jerusalem.

than resign herself. Some viewed this as a sign of weakness, a missed opportunity to take charge.

"Maybe this is a continuation of her always being a team player or, to put it bluntly... she has no balls," says political science professor Reuven Hazan, also of Hebrew University. "Tzipi Livni could have driven the final nail in the coffin, saying, 'You are responsible [for the war's poor handling], you are incapable, and also corrupt. I'm going to challenge you.'"

Others argue Livni's actions were admirable and brave, particularly since she knew her boss could fire her for her remarks. "She said what she had in mind. She didn't hide it. She decided that she is not the one to give up [by resigning]... and she continues to fight in her quiet, assertive way," says Dotan. "What she puts on the table is: 'I disagree with you, let's talk about the disagreement and find a way for Israel to prevail.'"

Another challenge for Livni as a prospective prime minister is her lack of strong military experience in a country where security is considered paramount. At the same time, however, many admired Livni's pro-diplomatic stance during the 2006 Lebanon War.

"She was the first to demand a diplomatic process, to call the United Nations, to try to stop the war, to find another way," says Talia Livni, president of the women's organization Na'amat (and no relation). "This is a very feminine way of thinking." Because Olmert sidelined Livni—his own foreign minister—during the 2006 war, she emerged unscathed from the Winograd Commission's interim report. Criticism was instead

lodged at Olmert, as well as at the former defense minister and former chief of staff, for "very serious failings" concerning their decision to go to war. Livni and her ministry are credited with preparing the diplomatic ground that led to the ceasefire ending the war.

Livni has even earned respect from her Palestinian counterparts. In October she was chosen by Olmert to lead the Israeli team in negotiations with Palestinians before the late 2007 U.S. peace summit in Annapolis, Md. "I really do respect her as a genuine person and a lady of peace," says Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat. "By the way, she's tough. She has the strongest body language with her eyes and eyebrows. She can deliver any message she wants without saying a word."

But, Livni often appears preoccupied with internal politics and public opinion at the negotiations table, Erekat claims (which he says she denies). He feels she also needs to realize that "negotiations did not begin with

Livni is a highly capable woman "willing to take risks, roll up her sleeves and jump into the field and play," says Rina Bar-Tal, chairperson of the Israel Women's Network and a former deputy mayor of the city of Ra'anana. "Not many women are willing to do that." But Livni's greatest mistake, according to Bar-Tal, is that she hasn't dedicated the time to really sell herself yet. "She hasn't set herself aside to make the decision that it is Tzipi's time now."

In addition, Bar-Tal and other women's-rights activists believe Livni must reach out more to women if she intends to aim for the country's top post. Similarly, some were disappointed that she didn't take a public stand regarding the sexual-harassment scandals involving former President Moshe Katsav and former Justice Minister Haim Ramon (see *Ms.*, Winter 2007).

"We have so few role models in this country—two female ministers, a speaker of house, 17 women members in the Knesset out of 120,"

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—TZIPI LIVNI

her" and could benefit from experiences of previous Israeli negotiators.

Born into a right-wing family of ardent Zionists, Livni has moved from the hawkish right to the center in recent years. She supported former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's unilateral decision to disengage from the Gaza Strip in 2005 and today is a strong advocate of the two-state solution—"two homelands for two peoples, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security."

Bar-Tal notes. "We would like them to be part of the fight, the campaign, part of us."

For now, Livni's attention appears focused on another issue. "I don't know if women are better at resolving conflicts, but we should try," she said at the Vienna conference. Then, with concern reminiscent of "mother of the nation" Golda Meir, she added, "It is our responsibility, for the generations to come."

—BRENDA GAZZAR