

Israeli electioneering with bombs

Livni and Barak pin their hopes on Gaza rampage

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Of the three politicians who announced the military assault on Gaza to the world on Saturday, perhaps only the outgoing prime minister Ehud Olmert has little to lose — or gain — from its outcome.

Flanking the Israeli prime minister were two of the main contenders for his job: Tzipi Livni, the foreign minister and the new leader of Mr Olmert's centrist party, Kadima, and Ehud Barak, the defence minister and leader of the left-wing Labor Party.

The attack on Gaza may make or break this pair's political fortunes as they jostle for position against Benjamin Netanyahu's right-wing party, Likud, before a general election little more than a month away.

Until now Ms Livni and Mr Barak have been facing the imminent demise of their ruling coalition as Mr Netanyahu and the far Right have surged in the polls and looked set to form the next government.

Both have strenuously denied that the election has any bearing on the timing of the Gaza operation. But equally they hope a successful strike against Hamas may yet save them from electoral humiliation.

In the run-up to the election, observed Michael Warschawski, a founder of the Alternative Information Centre in Jerusalem, "all Israeli leaders are competing over who is the toughest and who is ready to kill more".

Mr Netanyahu, pushed out of the spotlight, has had to turn his fire away from the two other parties and instead lambast easy political targets: in recent speeches he has questioned the loyalty of Israel's 1.2 million Arab citizens and demanded the resignation of the only Arab government minister.

Mr Barak, an unpopular former prime minister but Israel's most decorated combat soldier, has the most political capital to gain from the current military campaign. With his once-dominant Labor Party languishing in the polls, he will take the credit or blame among voters for the outcome in Gaza.

Ms Livni is in a more precarious position. Her glory, if the operation proves a triumph, will be of the reflected variety. But as Mr Netanyahu's fortunes have grown, her political fate has become increasingly dependent on a continuing centre-left alliance with Mr Barak. The two, it seems, stand or fall in these elections together.

Nonetheless, the stakes for both are high. Mr Olmert's popularity nosedived over his mishandling of a similar venture in summer 2006, when he approved air strikes on Lebanon and a limited ground invasion that failed to crush Hizbollah.

A subsequent damning state inquiry, the Winograd Committee, ensured that the usual corruption scandals that haunt most senior Israeli politicians eventually caught up with Mr Olmert and forced him to step down.

Mr Barak and Ms Livni presumably believe they have learnt the lessons of Mr Olmert's miscalculation in Lebanon. So far they appear to be playing a cautious hand, wary of risking major Israeli casualties in a large-scale ground war or of reoccupying the Strip.

They have also limited the operation's goals to "teaching Hamas a lesson" and creating "calm in the South" — code for quietening rocket fire from Gaza. Mr Barak, in particular, has preferred bland slogans such as "now is the time for fighting" rather than defining the rationale for the operation.

The timing of the Gaza attack offers Mr Barak and Ms Livni several advantages.

First, a head of steam had built on both the Right and Left inside Israel demanding that military action be taken against Hamas to stop the rockets.

Days before the Gaza operation, even Meretz, a far Left party, issued a statement favouring a military strike against Hamas. Protests so far have been confined inside Israel to tyre-burning at the entrances to Arab communities and a demonstration among a few hundred peace activists in Tel Aviv.

Meanwhile, right-wing politicians who accused Mr Barak of treason for allowing humanitarian aid into Gaza last Friday — a ruse on his part to wrong-foot Hamas before the air strikes — look foolish.

According to reports in the Israeli media, Mr Barak had been planning the attack on Gaza with his chiefs of staff for at least six months — about the time the original ceasefire was being agreed with Hamas.

Given their delay in launching the operation, Ms Livni and Mr Barak face little danger of being accused in hindsight of the recklessness or lack of preparation that blighted Mr Olmert's escapade in Lebanon.

Second, by launching the attack when many foreign reporters were away from the region for the holidays, the government hoped to be able to inflict the maximum damage on Gaza before the media could catch up.

It will take some days before western reporters effectively renew the pressure against Israel over its weeks-old decision to bar them from entering the Strip. The result will be fewer investigations of Israel's choice of targets in Gaza, or the nature of the casualties, and a greater emphasis on talking heads in studios in Jerusalem, at which Israeli spokesmen excel.

Third, Israel has exploited the power vacuum in Washington. George W Bush, the outgoing

US president, has rarely exerted significant pressure on Israel and is even less likely to do so in the dying days of his administration.

The incoming president, Barack Obama, meanwhile, will not want to precede his presidency with a major confrontation with Israel's powerful lobby. Most western governments, Mr Barak and Ms Livni hope, will take their cue from Washington's silence.

And fourth — and most importantly — their political rival, Mr Netanyahu, has been silenced. His main platform had been insisting on a tougher approach in Gaza.

In the current "state of emergency", the parties have agreed to suspend the usual election campaigning, leaving Ms Livni and Mr Barak visibly in charge of the country's security.

But as one Israeli commentator, Yossi Verter, warned, Mr Netanyahu should not be written off as the Israeli population moves once more on to a war footing.

"History teaches us that military campaigns which occur during [Israeli] election campaigns ... benefit the right-wing more than any other camp."

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