



## Ehud Olmert: First Among Equals

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Just two weeks ago, when the leadership of Israel Policy Forum visited Israel, there seemed to be a consensus surrounding the sustainability of the current government coalition. Multiple options and scenarios were confidently floated by politicians and pundits, envisioning the replacement of Defense Minister Amir Peretz with either Ehud Barak or Ami Ayalon, front-running contenders in the Labor party primaries scheduled for late May. The reshuffling of the Cabinet, went the thinking, would be followed by a bold diplomatic move in the peace process on Prime Minister Olmert's part, diverting public attention from the failings of the Lebanon War of 2006 and the myriad other scandals plaguing his government.

But all of that changed as of 5 PM on April 30th, when the interim findings of the Winograd Committee were made public. Not even the political advisors who had carefully crafted strategic options for the prime minister were prepared for the severity of the report. Hastily his team, struggling for spin, switched tactics: Instead of Olmert and his Kadima party stressing the collective responsibility of the Cabinet for the bungled war, the prime minister declared his determination to remain in office, pledging solemnly to fix what is broken.

The Winograd report bluntly portrayed Olmert as an inexperienced leader making uninformed yet fateful decisions without proper reflection or examination. Unsparing criticism was also leveled at former IDF Chief of Staff Dan Halutz, described by the committee as misguided and imperious, and the woefully unqualified Minister of Defense Amir Peretz. But the final buck stopped at Olmert's door. The trio may have been equally culpable, but the P.M. was first among equals.

Polls taken in the hours after the report's release showed public opinion to be of virtually one mind – the prime minister must go. With 69% of the public believing that Olmert should step down (and 74% thinking that Peretz should resign), the momentum of popular discontent may be just beginning.

This Thursday, May 3rd, the first mass demonstration calling for the immediate resignation of the government will take place, in Tel Aviv's Rabin Square. Initiated by army reservists and bereaved parents, the broad-based protest movement includes Gen. Uzi Dayan and his fledgling political movement Tafnit ("Turnaround"), the Movement for Quality Government in Israel, and the Council of Settlements in Judea and Samaria. Whether or not this also turns into a partisan rally -- Bibi Netanyahu was slated to speak, among others -- major political maneuverings have already commenced, and media commentators will be working overtime to predict the demise of the government, one way or another.

The Israeli street has been relatively quiet since the Second Lebanon War. This could be due to prolonged fatigue from the unending conflict, or a sense of impotence in the face of unabated corruption scandals, or the fact that, at the end of the day, life did go on last summer and the economy remained remarkably strong. But the harsh critique of the Winograd commission, that repeated over and over again the word "failure" in every context and at every level, raises such serious questions that weariness and apathy may be replaced with determined engagement. Indeed, the Winograd Report may be seen as a deliberate effort to rouse the public from its torpor, to urge the people, as befits a democracy, to draw the appropriate conclusions regarding the rule of their elected government. If the people don't oust Olmert, some suggest, the committee may recommend it explicitly when they present their final report in mid-summer.

In the new post-Winograd reality, the world has already shifted. Labor faction head Eitan Cabel resigned his position in the Cabinet less than 24 hours after the report's publication. In spite of declarations made by the Labor front-runners of their willingness to join the Olmert government as Minister of Defense, Ayalon has already called on Olmert to resign, and Barak is expected to follow suit. Leaders of Kadima are for the most part standing behind the prime minister, who in a somber and painful address to the nation, just hours after the release of the report, declared his firm intention to remain in office, not to resign. But the first cracks in Kadima have appeared, with at least one MK, Marina Solodkin, calling for Olmert to step down, while other party officials suggest that either Shimon Peres or Foreign Minister Tzipi

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Livni could replace him and thereby keep the coalition intact. Perhaps one of them could head what Ami Ayalon, on the day after Winograd, called a "National Recovery Government."

But with sabers of war rattling from Syria and Iran, with Gaza on fire and Hezbollah gloating over the Winograd verdict, the biggest question for this government's survival is not how deft they are at playing Israeli political chess, but how competent they are in leading Israel into the next war. Certainly, the million-plus residents of the north who were forced to flee their homes or huddle in sweltering shelters last summer will have serious doubts. So too the reservists and bereaved parents, who are now taking their private battles public. As one father said last night on prime time news, "Did our children die for their homeland or for the seats these politicians are trying to keep?"

No matter what happens at Thursday night's anti-government rally, or in next week's Labor party deliberations over whether to remain in the government, we Israelis are headed for a spell of political unrest and diplomatic paralysis. The timing couldn't be worse. The Arab peace initiative finally received recognition (albeit muted) from the Olmert government, and bi-monthly meetings between Olmert and President Mahmoud Abbas have begun. And just as the American administration seems poised to more seriously engage in peace efforts, with regular forays to the region by Secretary Rice and the unusual visit of Secretary Gates -- both of whom broke through the boycott of the Fatah-Hamas unity government by meeting with Salam Fayyad, the moderate finance minister -- we, the Israelis, are providing new fodder for deadlock. The mantra so often applied to the Palestinian leadership -- there is no viable partner because Abu Mazen is too weak to deal -- may sadly now describe, at least for the near term, Israel's government too. Which leaves both peoples, and the region, with a dangerous vacuum of leadership, and continued uncertainty about our shared future.

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