

# Israel after Winograd: Politics, Policy, and Prognostications

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## In-Depth Reports



On May 11, 2007, David Makovsky and Dennis Ross addressed The Washington Institute's Soref Symposium.

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[\(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC11.php?CID=65\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC11.php?CID=65) at the Institute. Ambassador Ross is the Institute's counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

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## DAVID MAKOVSKY

Several important issues have arisen in the wake of the recently released Winograd Report on the summer 2006 Israel-Hizballah war. The first and most pressing is Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's political survival, given the report's highly critical account of the war's origins and initial handling.

Olmert has chosen to stand his ground, refusing to resign despite the report's more negative contentions. His quest to remain Israel's leader has been influenced by several factors: his own political party (Kadima), the tides of public opinion, and the opposition party (Labor). Regarding Kadima, the party's bylaws were drawn up largely to protect its founder, Ariel Sharon, so no mechanism was drafted to oust a sitting leader. Therefore, Olmert did not have much difficulty quelling the Kadima mini-revolt that broke out in Winograd's wake. The prime minister was also unfazed by a mass public demonstration that occurred around the same time, given that his favorability rating was in the low single digits even before the report.

Public pressure will influence the Labor Party, however, and Olmert would be wise to pay heed to the opposition's actions, especially in light of upcoming primary elections. One of the two leading contenders for the top Labor post is

Ami Ayalon, who has pledged not to remain in a government headed by Olmert. Yet that decision would probably not be his to make even if he is victorious against former prime minister Ehud Barak. Instead, it would be up to Labor's Central Committee, whose members may not wish to take a hard stance against Olmert given their traditional fear of the political unknown -- specifically, the possibility that Labor's departure from the Olmert government could trigger new elections. Labor is fully aware that Likud leader Binyamin Netanyahu holds a large lead in the polls, and the party may therefore view early elections as a potential debacle of major proportions. Indeed, Olmert has frequently invoked the specter of Netanyahu's ascendancy in order to maintain coalition cohesion and his own survival.

In light of these factors, it is safe to assume that Olmert will weather the current crisis. All bets are off, however, if the second part of the Winograd Report -- slated to cover topics that the first installment did not, namely, the weeks following the war's first few days -- explicitly calls for Olmert's removal when it is released in the coming months. In that scenario, the prime minister could be forced out when the summer parliamentary recess concludes in October. The alternative of early elections could be as disastrous for Kadima as for Labor. A relatively new party, Kadima lacks the institutional and historical roots of its main rivals. Therefore, if it were forced into early elections without clear leadership, its prospects as a ruling party would likely be extinguished.

Apart from its potential political consequences, the Winograd Report sought to address the unsettled policy debate inside Israel regarding how to handle Hizballah provocations. Specifically, there are two ways to view the Israeli government's summer 2006 failures. The first school of thought argues that Israel failed to launch an effective military offensive to eliminate Hizballah as a force in southern Lebanon. The Winograd Report, however, sides with the second school of thought, which argues that victory in this sort of guerrilla warfare was unattainable from the start, given the lack of clear fronts. Instead, Israel needed to define more attainable objectives of retaliation for Hizballah attacks and kidnappings, with the military adjusting its strategy accordingly.

DENNIS ROSS

One of the most important outcomes of the Winograd Report was not so much a diagnosis of the Israeli government's specific strengths and weaknesses, but rather an overall criticism of its failure to establish an objectives-based decisionmaking system for situations like the conflict with Hizballah. In the run-up to the summer war, Prime Minister Olmert was under constant media barrage due to the upsurge in rocket attacks, kidnappings, and other deadly incidents carried out by both Hamas and Hizballah. This pressure, coupled with his staff's failure to counsel him otherwise, fueled the prime minister's fear of being perceived as a weak leader of a weak country and ultimately led him into war.

In examining the process by which Israel entered the war, then, one should not focus solely on whether the goal of utterly crippling Hizballah was achievable. The more glaring problem lies in the fact that the government set no clear objective for the war other than to show the people and the world that Israel was acting in the face of attacks.

At least two possible objectives could have been established for the conflict, both of which were already supported by leaders within the government. One objective might have been to punish Hizballah for its actions and use this retaliation as a warning to other hostile actors. Such a measure might have taken the form of a brief, targeted mission, which would have been relatively easy to execute because Hizballah was already on the defensive in Lebanon. From a military standpoint, the mission would have aimed at affecting only Hizballah and its assets, not Lebanon's infrastructure.

Another possible objective could have been to clear Hizballah out of the area south of the Litani River, and then demand that an international force be deployed to enforce peace and stability in that area. Initially, Olmert chose not to pursue this objective due to the high financial costs and casualty rates associated with using ground forces.

Instead, because of its indecision, the government ended up pursuing a hodgepodge of all these objectives, entering

the war with the goal of punishment, then attempting to push Hizballah out of the South, and then finally working to eliminate Hizballah's status as a state-within-a-state entirely. This constant shifting of objectives based on new developments highlighted Israel's lack of leadership during the war, and its need for a guiding governmental hand in the process. For example, the government should have tapped into the political aspects of the crisis by calling on the United States (its chief ally) and Saudi Arabia (a key regional critic of Hizballah) to marshal international pressure in its favor, among other things.

Viewed from another perspective, the real question raised by the Winograd process is not whether the government will implement the report's suggestions on correcting specific decisions. Rather, the real question is how Israel will reform the decisionmaking process at its roots, implementing more decisive responses to situations such as the rising tensions with Syrian forces at the Golan border, or the constant violence in Gaza. The latter situation has the potential to evolve into something similar to southern Lebanon during the lead-up to the Hizballah war. At present, if such an explosive situation were in fact to emerge in Gaza, the Israeli government would be in the same bind it faced last summer: strongly believing that it cannot afford to appear weak, but lacking the system necessary to establish clear objectives.

Olmert's challenge is to prove that he is up to the task of fixing the problem he created. Although giving him room to do so is a good idea in theory, it would be a major risk for Israel to take, given that the country is surrounded by real security threats in Syria, Lebanon, and Iran. Most important, the Israeli government believes that Iran will develop a nuclear weapon by 2008, and at this point, Israel is not capable of handling such a threat. This pressure to act decisively may be the determining factor in the prime minister's survival.

Olmert will also likely attempt to make himself an indispensable figure on the Palestinian peace front. If that proves true, two factors need to be considered. First, Israel cannot expect an "all-prize, no-penalty" approach during peace negotiations. Second, the results of the Labor Party primary election will have a major effect on Israel's orientation. If Ehud Barak wins, then Israel will most likely move to the Syrian political track. If Ami Ayalon wins, however, his interests will likely take precedence -- namely, focusing on the Palestinian issue and examining the reality of a two-headed government run by Hamas and Fatah. Regardless of that election, the most important task for Olmert's government is to put its own objectives under intense scrutiny.

In Washington, the administration is currently divided on how to treat the vulnerable Israeli government. The State Department wants to push the Israelis harder, while the White House views the government's present condition as a paralyzing weakness. The State Department is winning that debate at the moment, but it needs the support of both Israel and Arab states, and ultimately the White House. ❖

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