

Olmert After Winograd:

A Battle for Survival

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

The just-released Winograd Report, an investigation of Israeli decisionmaking in the 2006 summer war with Hezbollah, has put Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in a battle for survival. Today, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni publicly called for Olmert's dismissal. Will the prime minister's tenure last beyond this growing crisis?

Background

The 150-page report (not yet released in English) is the most thorough analysis of Israeli national security decisionmaking ever carried out by an Israeli review panel. Led by retired judge Elyahu Winograd, the panel's account of the first five days of the war is filled with footnotes, direct quotes from cabinet meetings, and excerpts from the subsequent testimony of policymakers and senior military officials. The report singles out Olmert, Defense Minister Amir Peretz, and former Israel Defense Forces (IDF) chief of staff Dan Halutz for "severe failures," concluding that their decisions about launching the offensive in Lebanon were hasty and thus irresponsible, with objectives both undefined and unattainable.

Challenges Facing Olmert

The publication of the report creates or exacerbates a number of serious challenges to Olmert's future as prime minister.

Esteemed panel, sweeping conclusions. Olmert cannot charge that the Winograd panel was biased against him, as his cabinet named its five members and issued its terms of reference. At the time, he viewed the panel as a preferable alternative to a full-fledged commission headed by a justice of the Israeli Supreme Court. Yet, the panel's critique of his administration's performance during the war -- and its decision to go to war in the first place -- is so sweeping and bereft of even qualified praise that he now has little support to muster. In August, additional findings will be released regarding some of the most controversial aspects of the war. The panel's asserted right to recommend resignations is being widely interpreted in Israel as an indication that the worst is yet to come.

Lack of public support. Even before the report was issued, Olmert's favorability rating was in the single digits. Apart from the war, much of the public anger toward Olmert has been due to swirling allegations of corruption that do not

figure in the report and remain in the investigation phase. According to a Dialog poll released today by Haaretz, 68 percent of the Israeli public now wants Olmert to resign, while an estimated 74 percent wants Peretz to resign; these figures have been stable since the end of the war last summer. Indeed, riding out the political storm will not be easy. Labor Minister Eitan Cabel resigned yesterday, and three members of Olmert's Kadima Party urged the prime minister to step down as well. A mass demonstration in Tel Aviv calling for his dismissal is planned for tomorrow.

Anticipated political asset may become a liability. Before the Winograd Report was issued, Olmert believed that the upcoming May 28 Labor Party primary would enhance the gravitas of his government. Specifically, he hoped that the party would jettison its current head, Peretz -- who has become a political liability for the prime minister -- and select a political asset to of Olmert with strong security credentials, such as former prime minister and IDF chief of staff Ehud Barak or former Shin Bet and navy chief Ami Ayalon. Amid the report's scathing criticism, however, Ayalon announced on May 1 that he would not enter into a coalition headed by Olmert. So far, Barak -- considered a friend to Olmert -- has not followed suit. Ayalon is the frontrunner, though, and if he wins on May 28, the net effect will be a Labor Party refusal to join Olmert's coalition as a junior partner. This would deprive the prime minister of a governing majority and effectively force new elections.

Precarious state of Kadima. Although currently headed by Olmert, the Kadima Party was founded by Ariel Sharon in 2005 shortly before his debilitating stroke, amid anger that his Likud faction opposed Olmert's Gaza disengagement plan. In other words, the party lacks established political institutions. Ostensibly, this gives Olmert an advantage since the party has no well-defined provisions for removing its leader. Because it is so new, however, it can ill afford continuing political limbo. The coalition whip, Avigdor Yitzhaki, has resigned in protest of Olmert's refusal to step down. Moreover, the slow erosion of Olmert's standing has created an opportunity for Likud leader Binyamin Netanyahu to woo back many of the nineteen members of the Kadima faction originally from Likud or comparable satellite parties.

According to Israeli law, Knesset members who defect to another party cannot be considered candidates in the next elections unless they leave as a bloc -- specifically, a third of a party's members must leave en masse in order to retain candidacy. Under the current circumstances, the potential defection of a third of Kadima's membership -- ten of its twenty-nine Knesset seats -- no longer seems fanciful. This is especially true if Kadima parliamentarians reach the conclusion that the party has no future (polls already give it only fourteen seats if new elections are held). Moreover, if Netanyahu can galvanize eleven Kadima members, he could avoid elections altogether and become prime minister in a reconfigured Knesset coalition.

In short, Kadima cannot afford a drifting leadership that will make it a vulnerable takeover target for Netanyahu. Rather, its members are likely to view early elections as tantamount to political suicide. To stave off these prospects, they may choose to act quickly and seek an alternative leader.

What Next?

Olmert's survival strategy is to ride out the storm. For example, one of his key aides publicly stated that he intends to fire Livni as a result of her calls for his resignation. As of this writing, however, he has yet to do so. Other aides have recommended the firing as a way of quelling any Kadima rebellion and silencing critics within the party. If he does in fact fire Livni, he could decide to name Transportation Minister Shaul Mofaz or Deputy Prime Minister Shimon Peres in her place, effectively dividing potential party rivals.

It seems that Olmert's best hope to quell a Kadima rebellion is his ability to remind party members that there is no mechanism in the Kadima bylaws to remove him without his own consent. As such, they are incurring a political risk by opposing him at this juncture.

Apart from political moves, Olmert's aides have appeared in the Israeli media repeatedly, emphasizing three key

points: (1) the interim Winograd Report does not explicitly call for Olmert's dismissal, so critics should wait for its follow-up at the end of the summer before moving toward such action; (2) the Israeli public is not ready to deal with more elections, given that the country has held four elections in the past eight years; and (3) a focus on politics diverts public attention from Olmert's willingness to implement the Winograd recommendations and take institutional steps to upgrade the quality of Israeli national security decisionmaking.

If Kadima does find a way to replace Olmert, the leading candidates are Livni and Peres. Peres may appeal to some in Kadima who seek to preserve the party without making a generational change that could affect the future of other rivals. Peres would also attract remaining Olmert loyalists, most of whom are angry with Livni. Moreover, his appointment would be consistent with the Winograd Report's emphasis on the value of experience. For her part, Livni is quite popular and viewed as a rising political star in Israel. The Winograd Report portrays her as someone who believes military strikes should be limited to a day of bombings, and as an early believer in using diplomatic options to rein in Hizballah. Indeed, she is counting on her popularity as a lever to obtain support within Kadima and become its leader, reviving the party's sagging fortunes now and in an election down the road.

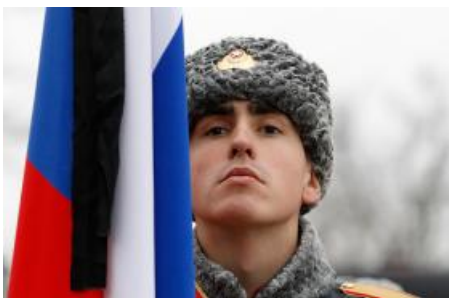
Conclusion

Olmert is counting on fear of the unknown as a way of deterring Kadima members from pressuring him to resign. How the Israeli public makes its views known -- whether through demonstrations or other forms of public criticism -- could prove to be decisive.

David Makovsky is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute and author of its 2006 Policy Focus [Lessons and Implications of the Israel-Hizballah War: A Preliminary Assessment](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=251) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=251>). ❖

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