

# When Bush Meets Olmert: New Political Contexts in Washington and Jerusalem

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Brief Analysis

Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert will be the first foreign leader to meet President George W. Bush after the U.S. midterm elections. Olmert's trip to Washington is part of a prescheduled visit to address the United Jewish Communities General Assembly in Los Angeles. When the two leaders meet at the White House on November 13, the domestic and foreign policy context of each will be sharply different from the time of their first formal encounter in May. Each has suffered serious political setbacks in recent months, and political survival has taken a front seat to policy initiatives. Because of these circumstances, their meeting agenda is likely to be more fluid than that of their last encounter in Washington.

### Bush's Domestic Context

The Democratic success in winning the House of Representatives and the Senate in this week's midterm elections is certainly not a welcome event for Bush, who enjoyed control of both houses of Congress during most of his first six years in office. When it comes to foreign policy, Democrats will now be able to conduct investigations into Bush's management of the war in Iraq, issuing subpoenas for administration officials to testify before Democrat-led hearings with witnesses also chosen by Democrats.

At his November 8 press conference, Bush made clear that he looks forward to the report of the Iraq Study Group (ISG) that may recommend a change of direction in Iraq. The ISG is headed by former secretary of state James Baker, a close confidante of the president's father, and by former congressman Lee Hamilton.

The ISG is likely to put a higher premium on bringing regional players, including Iran and Syria, to the table to discuss Iraq's future. It remains unclear whether Bush will adopt all of the commission's findings or rather seek to use the prospect of an alternative approach to Iraq, combined with a Democratic victory in the House, as a tactical means of prodding the Iraqi government to accelerate its training of Iraqi security forces and its attempts to mediate a social compact between the Shiite and Sunni communities. Since the ISG has yet to draft its recommendations, it is too soon to know whether these will include a move to renew dormant Israeli-Palestinian peace talks as a means of changing the perception of America abroad.

Beyond Iraq, there is a question about whether or not Bush may be leaning closer to a national security policy

avored by his father, George H. W. Bush. The former president is associated with the “realist” school that puts a premium on the external foreign policy behavior of regimes regardless of their internal dynamics and therefore tends to be less confrontational toward many Middle Eastern autocracies. At the November 8 press conference, President Bush announced that he is replacing Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld with a man Bush’s father appointed to head the CIA, Robert Gates. Two years ago, Gates coauthored a study at the Council on Foreign Relations that called for a dialogue with Iran. One wonders if Gates’s nomination makes the prospect of a U.S. military confrontation with Iran less likely. Gates is also a member of the ISG.

While foreign policy is largely the prerogative of the executive branch, it remains unclear whether or not the perception of Bush as a “lame duck” creates its own ripple effects. For example, will Iraqi insurgents think their military strategy is successful and accelerate violence? Since Hamas’s victory in January Palestinian legislative elections, Arab leaders have come to believe that Bush’s democratization effort is largely a spent force and that they therefore will pay no penalty for defying the White House. Will this view be now reinforced?

### Olmert’s Domestic Context

When Bush is in political trouble, he heads to the center. When Olmert is in political trouble, he has tended to lean more toward the right. Olmert’s domestic political context is also sharply different from what it was last spring. At the time, Olmert had just won political victory as head of the new Kadima party, which had made an alliance with Labor. Now, Israel’s war with Hizballah has weakened Olmert, who was already dogged by an array of corruption investigations. The war has taken an even bigger toll on the defense minister and Labor leader, Amir Peretz. Peretz’s disapproval rating has not fallen from the unprecedented 82 percent recorded during the war’s aftermath. In order to halt political hemorrhaging, Olmert sought to stabilize his coalition by adding the right-wing Yisrael Beitenu party headed by Avigdor Lieberman. The inclusion of the 11-member faction gave Olmert 78 seats in the 120-member Knesset. Now Olmert is less dependent upon Labor and is virtually assured of passing the annual budget next month—and budget passage is the glue that traditionally keeps Israeli governing coalitions together. Olmert would argue that, without Lieberman, passing this budget would have been very problematic given that Israel will need to dash Labor’s hopes for sharply increased social welfare spending in order to pay for the unbudgeted war of summer 2006.

Yet the question is raised: could Olmert’s short- and long-term objectives be at odds? Now Olmert wants to stabilize his coalition, but the future of the Kadima party is linked to providing some hope on the Arab peace issue. Some wonder if Lieberman’s inclusion will stymie Olmert on the Palestinian situation, given that Lieberman has a hardline record on the issue. Lieberman insists that he now favors a two-state solution, though this includes a controversial gerrymandering of Israeli Arabs and the territory upon which they reside inside the Palestinian state. Olmert appears to be confident that, if a serious peace option presents itself, he can always jettison his Yisrael Beitenu partners.

### The Palestinian Front

It is very unlikely that President Bush will push a grand initiative in dealing with Olmert and Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas, given the weakened political state of all three leaders. At the same time, neither Bush, nor Olmert, nor Abbas has any firm political initiative in mind. For his part, Olmert is not coming to Washington with the strategy he had in May, when he obtained Bush’s qualified blessing for the mandate conferred upon him at the polls—the advancement of his West Bank “Convergence” plan that called for the evacuation of most West Bank settlements. At least for now, Olmert has taken this idea off the table. In the wake of the 2006 Israel-Hizballah war, some Israelis fear that unilateralism has emboldened Hizballah and Hamas radicals.

Instead of diplomatic initiatives, the focus of Israel has been in the military sphere. Fearing Hamas will seek to emulate Hizballah by accelerating rocket fire into Israel or smuggling advanced weaponry, Israel has sought to destroy dozens of tunnels in southern Gaza. Israel also just completed what has been dubbed “Operation Autumn

Clouds,” seeking to halt the firing of numerous Qassam rockets from northern Gaza into southern Israel. While these military moves cannot be divorced from the sensitive negotiations between Hamas and Abbas on the formation of a non-Hamas government, it is unclear—judging from Israel’s actions—if Israel sees any relationship between the two. On Wednesday, Israel blamed errant shelling and expressed regret for the killing of nineteen Palestinian civilians in Beit Hanoun. Hamas leader Khaled Mashal vowed revenge. For now, Hamas has cut off talks with Abbas, who is seeking to cajole Hamas into ceding power and agreeing to a government of technocrats. Without the external pressure of economic sanctions and their impact on Palestinian public opinion, which is registering in polls that show growing disapproval of Hamas rule, it is unthinkable that Hamas could have reached the point of even considering a technocratic government. Clearly, if Abbas and Hamas prove to be successful in reaching an agreement, pressure would mount within Israel—and not from the United States—urging Olmert to seize the opportunity to avoid the dissolution of the Palestinian Authority and launch bilateral negotiations.

So far, the United States has confined its activity to asking its presidential security envoy on the ground, Gen. Keith Dayton, to head a \$23 million effort that would construct secure infrastructure on the Palestinian side of Gaza’s Karni crossing point. The goal is to facilitate Palestinian trade with Israel and the outside world, and bolster Abbas’s standing. Last week, the Israeli cabinet approved its support for General Dayton’s plan. Under the plan, the membership of Abbas’s Presidential Guard—now numbering 2,500 to 3,500—is to be sharply increased in order to fulfill security tasks that include securing the Karni facilities, upgrading security at Rafah, and obtaining weaponry from Egypt. The United States does not fund the Palestinian Authority’s Presidential Guard, but it has encouraged others to do so. Israel is also considering approval for the transfer of the Palestinian Badr Brigades from Jordan in order to shore up Abbas and ensure that Hamas is not able to expand its Gaza militia into the West Bank. The issue is sensitive, given the belief by some that the bolstered Presidential Guard and Badr Brigades are meant to lead a military confrontation with Hamas in the event that negotiations for a technocratic government fail.

#### Iran

A top issue of joint concern is the Iranian nuclear program. Will U.S.-Israeli bilateral consultations intensify? Will Olmert urge the United States to include a timetable for UN Security Council resolutions on Iran so the pace of diplomacy matches the pace of the Iranian nuclear program?

#### Lebanon

One cannot preclude that Olmert will complain about the lack of implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701. Israeli dissatisfaction centers on the failure to adhere to Resolution 1701’s call for an arms embargo of Hizballah weaponry. Syria has successfully intimidated the international peacekeepers who are supposed to set up roadblocks on the Syria-Lebanon border. While Israel had low expectations that peacekeepers would actively root out Hizballah arms, there was an assumption that Hizballah would avoid openly brandishing weapons. However, Hizballah has been more brazen of late, even south of the Litani River in southern Lebanon.

#### Syria

In an odd way, Israel is in an enviable diplomatic position. Focused on the Iran threat, Arab states are thinking about how to make the Arab Summit initiative of 2002 more palatable to Israel. Syria is also publicly calling for talks with Israel. This comes at a time when relations with the Palestinians are at a low ebb. Olmert may talk to Bush about looking at several opportunities outside the Palestinian issue. Some key figures in the Olmert coalition believe that, given the prospects of a looming confrontation with Iran, it is critical to explore whether Damascus is willing to engage in a strategic reorientation along the lines of Egypt in the early 1970s. In the case of Syria, such a reorientation would involve a move away from rejectionist elements like Iran, Hizballah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad. However, the Bush administration does not want to engage with Syria. Elements in the White House, Pentagon, and

State Department are still seething because of Syria's failure to act to seal its border with Iraq. They hold Damascus directly responsible for the deaths of American servicemen at the hands of jihadist volunteers. It will be interesting to see if this view toward Syria changes in light of ISG recommendations.

David Makovsky is a senior fellow and director of the Project on the Middle East Peace Process at The Washington Institute. He is the coauthor of the recently released Institute Policy Focus [Lessons and Implications of the Israel-Hizballah War: A Preliminary Assessment \(templateC04.php?CID=251\)](#). ❖

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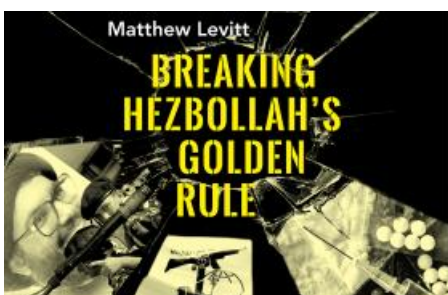
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