

Questions Raised on Olmert Government's Viability

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Articles & Testimony

David Makovsky, an expert on Israeli politics, says in the aftermath of the month-long Israeli-Hezbollah conflict, questions are being raised about the viability of the government of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. “There are going to be a lot of questions on whether the Olmert government can survive,” Makovsky says. “There are some who wonder if it can survive with having neither a prime minister nor a defense minister who was a general.”

Makovsky, senior fellow and director of the Project on the Middle East Peace Process at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, says as a result of the war, Olmert will be unable to withdraw unilaterally from the West Bank. He says he hopes other Arabs will hold Hezbollah responsible for the lack of progress.

Bernard Gwertzman, Council on Foreign Relations: In the Israeli press there is an anecdote about graffiti outside a bomb shelter in the north that says, “Arik [Ariel Sharon] wake up! Ehud [Olmert]’s in a coma!” Is there now a lot of second guessing that if Sharon was still in the driver’s seat, they would not have had this kind of drawn-out war in Lebanon?

David Makovsky, The Washington Institute: Sharon was in power during the time these rockets were massed. And there are two popular conclusions: one is that he was totally preoccupied by trying to quell the Palestinian intifada—the rash of suicide bombings and violence between 2000 and 2004. Therefore, he limited himself to diplomatic protest [about Hezbollah activities]. There is also the psychological view that he was so identified with the Lebanon war of 1982 that if he did attack Hezbollah, people would assume he was coming to finish the job, and he would not be able to garner international support.

Gwertzman: What if Sharon was still prime minister? What would have happened?

Makovsky: It is important to understand it is not that Israel woke up one day and said, “Oh my god, we did not know there were 12,000 missiles.” They knew it, but all this diplomacy frankly failed. Resolution 1559 that was passed by the UN Security Council calls for the disarmament of Hezbollah, and yet UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and others frankly did nothing to see that [the UN’s] own resolutions were implemented.

It is only with the backdrop of this failed diplomacy, this failed Security Council resolution, that you can even look at the Israeli military approach, or else it totally looks like a bolt from the blue. I am not here to say what Israel did was

ideal because clearly they did not know they were basically unprepared to turn a Hezbollah attack into an all-out war. If there is one lesson where Sharon might have done it differently, he might have had a better understanding that Israeli wars are always fought under a diplomatic stopwatch. This leadership felt that if the United States can do an air bombing of Kosovo in 1999 for seventy-eight days, or do an air war against the Iraqis for six weeks in 1991, then Israel had unlimited time too. But in fact different rules were applied.

Gwartzman: This conflict with Hezbollah was a very unusual war in that it went on for a month without much let up and an awful lot of urban destruction. The previous wars were really not fought in urban areas.

Makovsky: This is Hezbollah's ideal war. They relied on conventional military support, where they got state-of-the-art missiles but were not bound by the traditional rules of warfare. They hid behind Lebanese civilians and fired indiscriminately against Israeli civilians. I saw the Palestinian minister of culture saying we can only aspire to be Hezbollah. Hezbollah views itself as the model combatant against Israel; they went fifteen rounds with "Muhammad Ali" and they are still standing. Let's be clear, they did not fire a single punch above the belt. They fired indiscriminately 4,000 rockets at innocent women and children, and this defines who they are.

Gwartzman: Now Amir Peretz is in a peculiar situation, too, because he is a defense minister with no military experience. And he has called for resuming negotiations with Syria, for which I guess he is getting attacked in the Israeli press.

Makovsky: There are going to be a lot of questions on whether the Olmert government can survive. There are some who wonder if it can survive with having neither a prime minister nor a defense minister who was a general. Olmert has been in national security decision making [as a deputy prime minister], but Peretz has not. One wonders if in order to salvage this government, there is going to have to be some sort of cabinet reshuffle.

Gwartzman: There was some rumors that [former General and later Prime Minister Ehud] Barak might be brought in as defense minister.

Makovsky: The two Ehuds are friends—Olmert and Barak—and there is a lot of mutual respect. I wonder if Olmert would bring Barak in or bring back [former Defense Minister Shaul] Mofaz. But it is not so simple because unlike the American system—as you know—where the president kind of hires and fires, here the prime minister is always cobbling together a coalition [because he requires the support of various factions to get a majority in the Knesset]. I can't speak with any knowledge, but I wonder if Olmert has to take some dramatic step.

Gwartzman: Will there be an investigation or official inquiry into the way the war was managed?

Makovsky: It is way too soon. The public saw hesitancy. That is what upset them. The generals were really spooked in the year 2000. Right after Israel left Lebanon, [Hezbollah chief Sheikh Hassan] Nasrallah gave a speech, before 30,000 supporters, saying "We pushed the Israelis out of Lebanon after eighteen years, and this is our gift to you our Palestinian brethren: You may think Israel is strong, but it is really a spiderweb. It may look menacing, but you blow on it and you can flick it away. Don't negotiate with these people, kill them." Many Israelis referred to that speech as an example that the Israel deterrent had been eroded. So in many ways they saw this war as representing something larger than the issues at the border and even the missiles, but [something that] was needed to regain the sense of respect of the other side that they are a fearsome fighting machine. People wonder what the image really is today.

Gwartzman: Who was prime minister in 2000 when Israel pulled the troops out?

Makovsky: Barak. When he did it, he was hoping to do a package deal with the Syrians. He went to Geneva to nail it down, and it came apart. Barak had run the previous year, saying he would get out of Lebanon within a year. He preferred to do it through negotiations, but since Syria dominated Lebanon, the assumption was that if you do a deal with the Syrians, you can do a deal on Lebanon.

Gwertzman: I was rereading former chief Mideast negotiator Dennis Ross's book the other day, and he makes it quite clear Barak backed off at the last minute on a Syrian deal because he was afraid of the political repercussions at home.

Makovsky: That is certainly one of the views. Others thought he thought you could do a deal without giving the Syrians the shoreline on the Sea of Galilee, believing the Israeli public would never agree to give Syria any control [of what] is a prime source of water.

Gwertzman: That is quite a chapter there, how Barak was almost manic about getting President Clinton involved [in negotiations with Syria].

Makovsky: You are right. Then what happened is the Jewish mothers basically led a grass roots protest movement in the late 1990s. Until then, they had accepted [the late Prime Minister Yitzhak] Rabin's view that you could do a deal with Syria and Lebanon together. But in the late 1990's, under the Benyamin Netanyahu government, many Israelis said, "Hey, you know, we will lose some thirty kids a year, and these missiles are flying right over the buffer zone. So what good is it to have a buffer zone if the missiles are flying right over us? So why are our boys dying for nothing?" And Barak's number one campaign pledge was he was going to get them out within a year. He thought he would do it in a way that was in a diplomatic package. In the end, when that fell through, he went unilaterally. Many of the generals were against it and felt it was intensifying weakness.

Gwertzman: Now I see Olmert is indicating he is going to hold off on his West Bank withdrawal because other priorities are going to take money, like rebuilding the north. On the other hand, I think politically he could not possibly announce a pullout from the West Bank any time soon.

Makovsky: Because many people think Nasrallah is standing ten feet tall. The Arabs have him to thank that an Israeli leader who was elected on getting settlements out of the West Bank has now called it off. This should be part of the reckoning that goes on in Lebanon and elsewhere.

Gwertzman: Also, in Lebanon itself, the people who have traditionally been hostile to Hezbollah are now speaking out. Saad Hariri, the son of the assassinated former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, blasted Syrian President Bashar Assad the other day for his speech in which he blamed Lebanon for everything.

Makovsky: To me, when we judge the results of this, we have to see is there going to be some sort of internal reckoning for Nasrallah inside Lebanon—that a country on its way to rebuilding itself after the civil war has encountered serious devastation. And here was a non-state actor that was helping bring the country into war. Israel is going through a painful reckoning now, but that is the strength of a democracy that it can go through that reckoning and emerge stronger. And it should not be interpreted as it is unraveling or anything like that. The question is whether there is going to be a reckoning for Nasrallah. ❖

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