

# Mr. Olmert Goes to Washington:

## Prospects for U.S.-Israel Relations

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May 22, 2006

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### Brief Analysis

**O**n May 16, 2006, David Makovsky and Dennis Ross discussed Ehud Olmert's "consolidation plan" and his agenda for his first visit to Washington, D.C., as prime minister of Israel. David Makovsky is director of the Institute's Project on the Middle East Peace Process. Dennis Ross, the Institute's counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow, is a veteran U.S. peace envoy who has served under both Republican and Democratic administrations.

### DAVID MAKOVSKY

Ehud Olmert is proposing a plan to withdraw 60,000 settlers from the West Bank and consolidate Israel's borders. His reasoning is that these settlers have been in limbo for thirty-nine years. He does not want their presence in the West Bank to jeopardize Israel's democratic nature, nor to use them as human bargaining chips in negotiations. He is looking at the issue from the perspective of security instead of ideology.

Olmert's coalition is likely to remain united. Olmert is not likely to face a crisis over withdrawal. His own party, Kadima, has its *raison d'être* withdrawal and there are no strong internal divisions within his party. There are only fifty people in the Knesset who are against territorial withdrawal, a lower figure than that Sharon was faced with for his withdrawal from Gaza. And Olmert is a seasoned politician and knows which ministries to work with and rely on. He will count on the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of the Interior, which gives municipal allocations, and also the Ministry of Justice. Plus his coalition partners have reason to stay with the government. The two main religious parties, United Torah Judaism and Shas, would rather be in a coalition with Olmert than lose their influence. In the Gaza withdrawal, United Torah Judaism voted against the pullout but managed to retain its presence in government. The Pensioners also need to remain in power. So does Labor leader Amir Peretz, the minister of defense, who needs to build up his credentials; he wants to remain in power long enough to prove that he has the potential and

experience to eventually become prime minister.

To be sure, there are weak points in Olmert's position. No Russians have entered the coalition. Amir Peretz is a mercurial figure. And Olmert cannot count on the religious parties to support him on the plan for withdrawal, which being called the "convergence plan."

When Olmert meets with President Bush, he will work on recreating the same chemistry and partnership that Sharon had with Bush. There will be three main items on his agenda: Iran, Hamas, and the convergence plan.

There is no indication that Hamas will moderate. As part of a larger Islamist movement, it has no incentive to change its ideology. The United States and the Quartet will have to work together and create a unified strategy to help individual Palestinians and not Hamas. There is some confusion about the outcome of the recent Quartet meeting on Hamas. Washington does not want to transfer funds to pay the salaries of Palestinian Authority (PA) employees, while Europeans are willing to use the World Bank as a means of doing so, primarily for 12,000 healthcare workers.

Convergence is currently a concept, not a plan. At the moment, Americans and Israelis are at the discussion stages of listening to each other's ideas and expectations. There are many questions and variables to consider about how to make the plan work. There are about 60,000 people in seventy-two settlements on the wrong side of the fence, and there is the delicate question of the Arab neighborhoods in Jerusalem. Plus it is unclear whether or not Israel can consult with or rely on PA president Abu Mazen. Working with him may be a dead end. Another question to consider is whether the pullout from the West Bank will be solely a civilian pullout or also an army pullout. Most likely the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) will have to remain for a time. Another Israeli concern is how much the withdrawal will cost and whether any of this cost can be shared with the United States through creative options. Right now, any estimates of the cost of convergence are vague and are based off of the Gaza model instead of being calibrated for the West Bank.

Israel is concerned about whether it will receive any acknowledgement for carrying out the withdrawal. This acknowledgement would ideally come in the form of official international recognition of Israel's borders. Considering that Israel received little recognition at the United Nations for having withdrawn from Gaza, Israel has to consider whether the risks of withdrawal from the West Bank are worth the chance of political gain.

DENNIS ROSS

Hamas is defined by its commitment to resistance; based on its official justification of the recent bombing in Tel Aviv, there is no indication that it will change. Any ceasefire that Hamas agrees to will be essentially meaningless as it will be condoning attacks from other groups. Continuing attacks will force the Israelis into more operations like the one in Jenin. At the moment, Israelis are experiencing daily rocket fire from Gaza, an issue that receives little press attention. Such attacks cannot be justified and cannot become a reality in the West Bank if Israel withdraws.

There are three ways of trying to isolate Hamas without cutting off Palestinian society. The first alternative would be to use UN mechanisms that are already in place and expand them to cover healthcare and education. The second would be to use Abu Mazen and make his office a conduit for welfare or developmental assistance. And the third would be to create a new body of nongovernmental organizations, working with some leading Palestinians who are willing to help, to form a secular *dawa* to compete with the religious *dawa* that is one of Hamas's pillars. While such initiatives will not provide immediate alternatives to Hamas, they will lay the groundwork for future movements that can challenge it.

Carrying out the consolidation plan would be historic and irreversible. When the settlements are given up, they will be given up for good. The idea of consolidation and in-gathering all the settlers will be extremely difficult to implement. In order for it to work it will have to be carried out in one dramatic action. Israel will need a strong U.S. commitment and should also engage in legitimate negotiations with the Palestinians and demand a guarantee that

they will follow through on their agreements. Abu Mazen has suggested that Israel negotiate a final settlement with him that he could then present to the PA for a referendum. This way of negotiating would be unacceptable to Israel. At the moment the United States is listening to Israel and its plans and has questions about the root reasons for the border's path, the conditions for an IDF withdrawal, and the expenses involved in the withdrawal.

There are good chances that Olmert, as a politician with a skill for small talk and putting people at ease, can forge a personal and natural connection with President Bush when they meet. The Bush administration may be searching for a way to finish its term with a victory and may want to focus on Israel and the Palestinians in the next months.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Cecile Zwiebach. ❖

Policy #1105

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