

# Israel's Unlikely Transformer

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

**R**ead (<templateC07.php?CID=193>) Ehud Olmert's remarks at The Washington Institute's 2003 Weinberg Founders Conference.

I sat alone with Ehud Olmert. It was Sept. 20, 2003, and he was despondent over the progress of peace talks with the Palestinians. Just two weeks earlier, the main hope for moderation on the Palestinian side, Mahmoud Abbas, had resigned as prime minister. And now Olmert was telling me the previously unthinkable: Israel might have to move unilaterally out of parts of the West Bank and Gaza if negotiations with the Palestinians continued to fail.

"Israel cannot wait forever," he confided as we sat together in a quiet alcove at a Northern Virginia conference center. "It has to move if there is no chance for negotiations."

Olmert, then deputy prime minister of Israel, asked me to refrain from writing about our conversation until he had gone public himself. I understood why. His words marked a radical ideological change with profound political implications. For years, the Israeli right had refused even to consider yielding territory on the West Bank and Gaza to the Palestinians. Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's infuriating positions and the violence raging since 2000 had all but ensured Israel would not budge. Now, the nation's second most powerful politician was telling me that Israel could no longer be held hostage by the irresponsibility of the other side.

Last week, Olmert took the final steps in the evolution he had first hinted to me a few years ago. His Kadima party won Israel's parliamentary elections on a platform that included pulling settlements out of most of the West Bank. For a man who came of age in right-wing youth activism and earned his political stripes as the public voice of the "complete land of Israel" movement, his ascent to prime minister caps a remarkable political transformation.

I have witnessed this transformation up close, through encounters with Olmert over nearly two decades of reporting on a life brimming with personal and political contradictions. From a young confidant of Israel's conservative Likud leaders in the 1980s to the hawkish mayor of Jerusalem in the 1990s to the father of peace-activist children, Olmert has traveled significant ideological terrain. In many ways, Israeli society has traveled that road with him.

Much is riding on this journey. For the first 29 years of Israel's existence, the founding Labor Party dominated national politics. When Labor faltered following the traumatic 1973 war, Likud took over for most of the next 29 years. Last fall, former prime minister Ariel Sharon split Likud, upset that the party did not support him in the

landmark Gaza pullout. Last week's election marked the first time that a third party -- Kadima, which Sharon founded about a month before suffering a stroke last January -- has won an Israeli election.

Settlements and occupation have not yielded peace with the Palestinians, and bilateral negotiations are remote now that Hamas -- a movement sworn to Israel's destruction -- is in power. Instead, Olmert campaigned on the promise of a new centrism, stressing the need to leave most of the West Bank and even parts of Jerusalem if there is no negotiating option that could yield final borders. He faces enormous challenges, ranging from the thousands of settlers furious about being evacuated from lands they consider Jewish biblical patrimony to the security nightmares posed by Hamas and like-minded groups. Olmert's political future -- and perhaps the future of his nation -- rides on that promise.

My first memorable conversation with Olmert was in 1990, when he was a government minister and I was the diplomatic correspondent for the Jerusalem Post. I asked him how Likud would respond to Secretary of State James Baker's ideas for moving the peace process forward. An Israeli unity government involving Labor and Likud had already collapsed over this issue. Olmert made clear to me that the new Likud government would not go forward with the peace process. He took out a piece of paper, refilled his ink pen cartridge, put aside his signature cigar, and sketched out why the ideas for a peace process would not pass muster with the Israeli coalition. I left our meeting convinced that Israeli politics trumped all for Olmert. Indeed, over time, he would become one of Israel's most skillful political practitioners.

My second memorable encounter with Olmert took place after the famous 1993 Oslo signing ceremony on the White House lawn, where an angst-ridden Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin shook hands with Arafat. Members of Likud were in mourning, and Olmert joined his party in voting against the accord in the Knesset.

Yet, when I spoke with him alone shortly thereafter, he confided that "you can agree or disagree with Rabin and [then-Foreign Minister Shimon] Peres, but you have to admit they have demonstrated enormous courage." This was a rare compliment across Israel's highly charged ideological aisle. It confirmed my earlier impression -- Olmert as a human calculator of political risk -- but also revealed that he valued those who defied politics for their beliefs.

By then, Olmert had become mayor of Jerusalem, a job he held for the rest of the 1990s. As mayor, Olmert twice inflamed tensions with moves cheered on by his hawkish backers. First, Olmert urged then-Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu to open an underground tunnel in Jerusalem's Old City, close to the sacred Temple Mount (though not underneath it as Arafat notoriously claimed). Riots ensued, leaving 15 Israelis and 70 Palestinians dead. And after the 1997 Hebron accord under which the Israeli military would exit much of the city, Olmert insisted that Netanyahu open up a new Jewish neighborhood in East Jerusalem.

As mayor, however, Olmert often appeared on the scenes of blown-up buses and markets, witnessing the pain of victims and consoling their families. Such experiences likely helped moderate his views. A famously non-religious man in an intensely religious city -- for instance, he was well-known for attending weekly soccer matches on the Sabbath -- Olmert often stood a few steps removed from the religious leaders citing biblical imperatives to reclaim ancestral lands.

As a fiery young Knesset member in the 1970s, Olmert had defied the venerable Menachem Begin over the 1978 Camp David accords between Israel and Egypt, which called for full withdrawal from the Sinai and offered a blueprint for Palestinian autonomy. And in 2000, he was furious over then-Prime Minister Ehud Barak's concessions in Jerusalem's Old City and on the Temple Mount as part of the "Camp David II" diplomatic effort. However, Olmert did not complain when Barak agreed to yield several Arab neighborhoods in East Jerusalem. He did not argue that the move violated the principle of what many Israelis consider "indivisible" Jerusalem -- though such a reaction would have been in keeping with his earlier politics.

Olmert's family also factored into his evolution. His wife, Aliza, an artist, has frequently argued with her husband over politics during their 35 years of marriage, and has even admitted that she often voted against his Likud party. And in a society that views mandatory military service as a patriotic duty, Olmert's son Ariel became a conscientious objector. Another son, Shaul, signed a petition urging soldiers not to serve in the West Bank, and Olmert's daughter Donna volunteers for a group monitoring the treatment of Palestinians passing through West Bank checkpoints.

Olmert spoke openly of his family's influence in this recent campaign, telling the Israeli daily Yediot Ahronoth: "They support me now, I guess they will vote for me, but they hold me very tight and say, 'Hey, Dad, you better behave yourself.' So I'm trying."

After nearly three years of the second intifada, 2003 brought some hope. The more moderate Abbas was the Palestinian prime minister, and many looked for him to lead his people away from the dead-end leadership of Arafat. However, within 130 days, Abbas resigned. I was no longer a journalist, but was back home with the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. We invited both Olmert and Nabil Amr, a top aide to Abbas, to address our annual conference in Virginia.

It was here that Olmert first suggested that if there were no prospects of peace talks, Israel would have to move unilaterally. Olmert felt time was not on Israel's side, a view at odds with Sharon, who felt time would either harmonize Israeli and Palestinian views or allow Israeli determination to prevail.

Olmert made his views explicit in a bombshell newspaper interview that December. He stated that West Bank occupation could not continue indefinitely. He cited demographic trends that threatened the character of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. He expressed concern that defeat of the two-state solution would give way to international calls for a "one-state" solution -- a euphemism for the destruction of Israel.

The trigger for that interview was a memorial service a few days earlier. Sharon was due to give the annual speech at the grave site of Israel's iconic founder David Ben-Gurion. Sharon canceled because of illness, and asked Olmert to stand in his stead. Speaking in the Negev's Sde Boker kibbutz, Olmert declared that "the greatness of Ben-Gurion was not just his capability to lift a vision of generations to the sky, but also to limit what was possible to the circumstances of time." Olmert went on to quote Ben-Gurion: "When it was a question of all the land without a Jewish state or a Jewish state without all the land, we chose a Jewish state without all the land."

Olmert would later ask posthumous forgiveness from Menachem Begin for voting against the 1978 Camp David accords. "I voted against Menachem Begin," Olmert said last August on the eve of the Gaza pullout. "I told him it was a historic mistake, how dangerous it would be, and so on and so on. Now I am sorry he is not alive for me to be able to publicly recognize his wisdom and my mistake. He was right and I was wrong. Thank God, we pulled out of Sinai."

When I saw Olmert in 2004 at his office in Jerusalem, I asked what motivated the stirring gravesite speech. He said that when Sharon asked him to speak, he asked the prime minister to fax him his planned remarks. Those remarks were about the need to cede parts of biblical Israel. Olmert thus believed that he had Sharon's political imprimatur, but in the eyes of the Israeli public, it was Olmert who pressed Sharon.

With Sharon in a coma, Olmert broke with the conventions of Israeli politics this year by declaring in the middle of an election campaign that if his party won, he would seek to evacuate most of the West Bank settlements. This was Ben-Gurion's formula, updated for the times -- a Jewish state without all the land.

The young Olmert would have been ideologically horrified. Olmert the politician would have viewed it as bad strategy; the pledge likely caused Kadima to lose about 10 Knesset seats in last week's election.

But Olmert today is no longer the ideologue or political operator of years past. Yet that very past may grant him the credibility to overcome multiple challenges and make his own journey into a new destiny for Israel as well.

David Makovsky is director of the project on the Middle East peace process at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and the former executive editor of the Jerusalem Post.



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