

# WebMemo



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## Israel's Coming Political Earthquake

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This past Sunday, a commission led by retired Tel Aviv District Court judge Eliyahu Winograd released its much anticipated interim report on Israel's conduct of the war with Hezbollah in Lebanon last summer.

The commission declared that Prime Minister Ehud Olmert had failed to lead the wartime decision-making process. It also diagnosed the main disease of the Israeli politico-military elite: the lack of a strategic doctrine "in the fullest sense of the term." Israel has suffered from this malady since the strategic surprise of the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

The political fallout from the commission's report will continue in the weeks and months ahead. Washington must continue to support Israel as its strongest ally in the Middle East but recognize also that Mr. Olmert's government is finished.

**Political Earthquake.** The blunt commission report is likely to reorder the Israeli political establishment and send Prime Minister Olmert, his Kadima (Forward) party, and Amir Peretz, the incompetent Labor Party leader and Defense Minister, packing.

Mr. Olmert, the interim report said, bears responsibility for his cabinet's and the military's poor performance. He made "mistaken and hasty judgments and did not manage the events, but was dragged along by the army. Mr. Olmert did not ask the army for alternative plans to those presented and did not ask the right questions."

The commission was also scathing in its criticism of former military Chief of Staff and air force general

Dan Halutz, who dismissed the threat of Katyusha rockets fired by Hezbollah and believed that the air force is the primary tool of fighting terrorists. Halutz has already resigned.

The report poured devastating criticism on Peretz, a former trade union leader, who lacked a military background and failed "to learn about the military" once he became Defense Minister. Peretz should have never accepted the appointment as Defense Minister, concluded the report—something every child in Israel already knows.

The commission also pointed a finger at former Labor Prime Minister Ehud Barak, who presided over the hasty pull-out from Lebanon in 2000 that led to Hezbollah's unchecked presence on Israel's northern border. These days, Mr. Barak is planning to replace the tainted Peretz and stage a comeback as a Labor leader and Defense Minister.

**Personal Responsibility.** These are only the preliminary findings of the commission, which was appointed by Mr. Olmert. The real punch will be delivered this summer, when the final report is due. Then, the commission is likely to place personal responsibility directly at the feet of the failed leadership. Mr. Olmert is likely to clear the scene early and

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is certainly unlikely to survive the final report, despite his ability to cling to power.

Today, Israel is a rudderless ship, with Prime Minister Olmert not only under fire from the Winograd Commission but also under multiple police investigations and subject to severe criticism from State Comptroller Micha Lindenstrauss. The accusations against him range from abuse of power and corruption to illegal real estate transactions.

**Systemic Failure.** Decades of failed Israeli political leadership have endangered the nation's precarious security. The country's secular leftists dream only of a "peace process," dreams that are shared by the diplomatic cocktail circuit from the European Union and the United Nations. Tel Aviv leftists, well-meaning and idealistic, are ignoring the rising tide of political Islam, both Sunni and Shi'a, which is sweeping the region. These are the same generals, politicians, and academics who failed to design a workable strategy for Israel's once-capable military and security services to face heavily armed and well-motivated terror armies like Hamas and Hezbollah. Israel has also failed to find an antidote to the effective propaganda machines from radical Islamist movements, some Arab countries, and Iran.

Post-war shell shock is fostering finger pointing, which has prevented the Israeli military from implementing the lessons learned from the Hezbollah War. This is the first war many Arabs say the Jewish state lost. Hezbollah in Beirut has welcomed the report, claiming that it proves that it won.

Israel is today led by a Prime Minister who sorely lacks public trust and is barely capable of functioning. His approval rating is in the single digits, while Peretz as Defense Minister is the butt of jokes. Any anti-terrorist action Mr. Olmert may need to take in the future could be seen as a "wag the dog" diversion from the devastating criticism of the Winograd report.

Israel is also missing its Finance Minister, who resigned due to corruption proceedings, and has been without a president since Moshe Katsav was suspended in response to police investigations of sexual assault and influence peddling charges. This

is the worst government crisis in the 59-year history of the Israeli state.

**What the Bush Administration Should Do.** The Bush Administration should not cling to Olmert and his flagging coalition. They are political corpses floating in the stormy waters of Israeli politics. They may not know it, but they are politically dead and should be left alone.

Instead, the Bush Administration should:

- **Work** with Israel to maintain its qualitative security edge in the region. This should include cooperation on advanced anti-missile systems capable of intercepting the short-range rockets that threaten American and Israeli troops and civilians in the region, such as Katyusha rockets fired by Hezbollah last summer.
- **Allow** Israel to purchase or selectively participate in the production of the cutting-edge aircraft necessary for its national defense. For this to happen, Israel should fully address U.S. concerns about unauthorized technology transfers to third parties.
- **Invite** senior Israeli civilian and military leaders to observe and study the U.S. congressional process of candidate confirmation for senior national security offices and to study national security policymaking and strategy. Israel lacks academic and professional frameworks for its elites to learn the tools of statecraft, whereas the U.S. has the necessary traditions and institutions for this specialized education.

**Conclusion.** The U.S. needs an Israel which can defend itself and effectively work with Washington in the increasingly unstable Middle East. To achieve this, Israel needs to go through a period of political cleansing and rebirth. Israeli society is open, vital, and robust enough to do it.

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