

# Olmert's Best Chance

**Gerald Steinberg**

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has again demonstrated his skill in manipulating Israel's dysfunctional electoral system. After surviving the Winograd commission reports on the mistakes made in the 2006 Second Lebanon War, Olmert faced another wave of calls to resign following testimony related to corruption charges. But through an agreement with Labor party leader Ehud Barak, a Knesset vote was cancelled that would have led to national elections in the fall and would probably have returned opposition leader Binyamin Netanyahu to power. Unless there are new political "earthquakes" (always a possibility in Israel), the current coalition is likely to continue until at least the spring of 2009.

As a result, and as part of a survival strategy that includes shifting the focus of media attention, Olmert's "peace offensive" remains very much on the table. The issues include the negotiations for a "shelf agreement" with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and talks with Syria. The prisoner exchange negotiations with Hizballah and Hamas and the unwritten ceasefire agreement that entered into effect in Gaza on June 22 are also part of this offensive.

For Olmert, the Palestinian dimensions serve multiple objectives. The platform of unilateral withdrawal on which Olmert's Kadima party ran in the 2006 elections collapsed after the Hamas coup a year later along with the escalation of rocket attacks against Sderot, extending to Ashkelon. Among the Israeli public, support for further withdrawals evaporated. Negotiations toward an "historic peace agreement" based on a two-state solution provide an alternative that Olmert and Kadima hope will keep them in power after 2009.

At the same time, Olmert also recognized the demand for action to end the missile attacks from Gaza. But a full-scale military operation to reoccupy Gaza could result in significant Israeli casualties and would leave the Israeli military back in control of the people and territory from which it had pulled out in 2005. While this is still considered by many to be the least-bad option, the ceasefire negotiated by Egypt provides a last alternative. This also opens the way for the return of Gilad Shalit, the kidnapped Israeli soldier who has been held for two years.

In addition, if this scenario succeeds and the Hamas leadership is able to prevent attacks, some Israeli leaders see this as the beginning of a more stable relationship based on deterrence--a major improvement over the chaotic Arafat and Fateh record. And if this fails because Hamas is unwilling or unable to halt the missile attacks or because Egypt fails to prevent arms smuggling, Olmert and Defense Minister Barak will be able to say that all other alternatives have been tried before ordering a major attack.

At the same time, the negotiations with the Palestinian Authority on a peace framework constitute a more uncertain proposition for Olmert and Kadima. Given the weakness of Abbas and in view of past experience, the goal is limited to a "shelf agreement" to be implemented at some future time when the Fateh leadership has regained control of the Palestinian political system, including Gaza. Polls show that most Israelis are skeptical about the ability to reach an acceptable compromise that would resolve Palestinian claims regarding refugees (the so-called "right of return"), recognize Jewish historical and religious claims in Jerusalem and accept Jewish sovereignty in the context of a two-state framework. Without these elements, for which Palestinian society has not been prepared and which Yasser Arafat totally rejected at Camp David in July 2000, the conflict will continue and the negotiations will fail. But there is still some hope that under American pressure, Abbas can deliver.

In addition, the Annapolis process helps Olmert show a close working relationship with the Bush administration, which discovered the political benefits of Arab-Israel peace efforts in its last year. The frequent photo-ops and pats on the back from the president of the United

States help Olmert to shift the domestic focus away from corruption and related issues. The negotiations are also presented as a core element in the strategy to end Iran's nuclear weapons program--the main item on Israel's security agenda.

But some of the related actions, such as removal of security checkpoints in order to promote economic improvement for Palestinians in the West Bank, also involve security risks for Israel. (The latest attempt to train an effective Palestinian police force that will also act against terrorists has yet to show results.) A single suicide bombing or terror attack will halt the process, and could also trigger the political "earthquake" that results in the collapse of the Olmert government.

Overall, the peace offensive includes numerous risks. But it is also Olmert's best and perhaps only chance of staying in power.- *Published 30/6/2008 © bitterlemons.org*

***Gerald Steinberg is the chair of Political Science at Bar Ilan University and executive director of NGO Monitor.***