

## Israel after Lebanon: warning siren, deaf ears

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These are strange political times in Israel. This became clear to me on the day the official commission of inquiry into Israel's disastrous Lebanon war of July-August 2006 issued its report. It became the main topic of conversation in many unlikely places, including a reception for the opening of an Irish film festival in Tel Aviv attended by Ruth Dayan, the widow of the late General Moshe Dayan, the legendary hero of the six-day war of 1967. When I asked her if she thought the report would bring down the government, she replied: "I hope not. Who wants an election now? Let (prime minister Ehud) Olmert stay - if he goes, we will get something worse."

The Dayan family is regarded as a prominent part of Israel's old aristocracy of the left; [Ehud Olmert](#) [1], leader of the Kadima party, is a long-time stalwart of the right. This should have been a startling comment to hear from the likes of Ruth Dayan. But in these days of political angst and uncertainty in Israel, old attitudes are no longer a reliable guide to current political judgments.

The report from the Winograd commission (named after its head, retired judge Eliyahu Winograd, and [released](#) [2] on 30 January 2008) may not exactly have seen the Israeli peace camp rallying to the support of Olmert (a man its members once roundly despised); but it has been shining a strobe-light on some classically wayward establishment gyrations that illuminate unexpected shifts in Israel's political landscape.

### Protect and survive

The document had had a strange journey to the light, in that this was the second, definitive (and much delayed) inquest on the planning and execution of Israel's bungled war; it followed an "[interim](#)" report [3] published in April 2007. That first report provided the hard evidence to validate the shock the Israeli public had felt as the war itself unfolded. In brief, Winograd comprehensively pinned guilt on the entire national establishment: the Israeli army was not ready for a war; prime minister Ehud Olmert had acted hastily in leading the country into war without a plan; the whole thing had been "a severe failure in lack of judgment, responsibility and caution."

Yet despite media and public clamour for heads to roll, the political and military leadership survived. There had been and were resignations - of chief-of-staff [Dan Halutz](#) [4] in January 2007, labour minister [Eitan Cabel](#) [5], defence minister [Amir Peretz](#) [6] (though the first and last of these had less weight than might appear, since both wanted to go anyway). Olmert and his

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cabinet stayed on, based mainly on the excuse that they would not leap to conclusions before "the full Winograd report" was published - supposedly three months later, i.e. by July 2007, a year after the war. In the meantime, Olmert's poll ratings slipped to single digits and 70% of the public wanted him to resign.

In the event the three months stretched into twenty-two. During this long interval, some fancy political and legal footwork has apparently been going on. Much of this surrounded the petition presented to Israel's high court of justice after [part one](#) [7] was published, to stop the Winograd commission from recommending in its full report the dismissal of individuals held responsible for the conduct of the bungled war. The aim of the petition, which the commission subsequently honoured, was to protect senior officers from unjust condemnation. But it also had the fortuitous effect for the politicians of sparing them too from harsh personal criticism and recommendations for early retirement.

This became clear in the days following the full report's release, when earlier speculation that it could precipitate the fall of the government quickly dissolved. Olmert's close aides bizarrely reported that he had been "moved to tears" while reading the chapters dealing with a disastrous ground operation during the war because, as he said himself, the report "lifted the moral stigma from me." The prime minister had already adjusted his patchwork coalition cabinet following the departure of the small nationalist [Yisrael Beiteinu](#) [8] party in protest at renewed Israeli talks with the Palestinian Authority.

That left Israelis to turn their gaze towards defence minister [Ehud Barak](#) [9] and his five Labour Party cabinet colleagues - the linchpin of the governing coalition. At the time of primary elections in the party in 2007, Barak had said he would resign if the second Winograd report was damning. The report's harsh conclusions left Barak in territory familiar to politicians - between the devil and the deep sea. He could either break his pledge and suffer the scorn, or keep it and suffer an early election.

Here the element of political fluidity with which I began came into operation: just as the support of Israel's leftwing establishment helped to seal Olmert's survival, so Olmert's Kadima closed ranks behind Barak at his moment of difficulty and voiced praise of his performance as the minister responsible for rebuilding the morale and efficiency of the army since the war.

## **Blame and shame**

Ehud Olmert has survived, and support for him has risen from its lowest point. But an opinion-poll published on 1 February showed 53% of respondents demanding his resignation, with 36% also supporting Barak's departure. "Barak and Olmert have become Siamese twins", wrote [Yossi Verter](#) [10] in *Ha'aretz*. "The public believes both are individually ill-suited to be prime minister."

There was, however, the issue of "worse to come" if Olmert resigned, which Ruth Dayan had hinted at. It even has a name - Binyamin "Bibi" Netanyahu, the remorselessly ambitious former prime minister and [leader](#) [11] of the rightwing Likud. In these circumstances most commentators agreed that Barak had little choice but to eat his resignation promise and stay on with Olmert.

The continuing turmoil in Hamas-run Gaza and no end to the rain of Palestinian rockets being fired into southern Israel encourage the surge of support for the political right. If reflected in an election result it would deliver a right-dominated [Knesset](#) [12], probably with Bibi Netanyahu as prime minister. This is a scenario as unpalatable to Olmert and Kadima as it is to Barak and Labour.

But the right has its own concerns. The sudden revival of interest in a middle-east settlement by a George W Bush administration in search of a legacy has caused alarm about the possibility of a renewed push to reach a two-state settlement with the Palestinians, something it mightily opposes.

Likud pounced on Winograd. "It's a resounding indictment, an earthquake for the government", said Silvan Shalom, Netanyahu's party rival (and even further to the right), yet on this occasion echoing his leader. Kadima's response was to brand Netanyahu [13] as opportunistic and to accuse the right of character assassination against Olmert.

So the politicians have settled into their familiar snarling contests, leaving the Israeli public without any sense of direction. Most citizens, it seems, have as much interest in reading Winograd part two as they did part one - which is none at all. But the Winograd panel itself offered a refreshing challenge to this atmosphere of recrimination and disconnection, in the way that it took an intensely keen interest in the role of the public in steering the country's destiny.

### **The next round**

Winograd ignored calls from the media to declare all Israel's leaders scoundrels who should be sent home, and asserted instead that the time had come to stop placing all responsibility, in all spheres of life, on the government, the army and the judiciary. The failures [13] of the government and the army in the Lebanon war were also the failures of a public that is shirking its responsibility, the report stated.

It obliquely addressed the contradiction that voters who declare to opinion-polls [14] that ministers and generals should pay the price of incompetence continue to elect the very people they despise. This public seems to expect committees like Winograd to wield the knife.

But if Winograd has identified a problem, it can't offer a solution. There is no sign that the cycles of Israeli political life will be broken. The familiar pattern is reflected too in rumblings about the consequences of the continuing Hamas rocket-attacks on Israel. The Israeli defence forces failed to dislodge Hizbollah [14] from south Lebanon; if they act on a belief that they might do better in dislodging Hamas from control of the Gaza strip, another circle will be complete. After Winograd, Olmert and the army duly promised "to internalise the lessons learned". Can this mean that having failed in the last war, they need another one so they can get it right?

The veteran Israeli commentator Ari Shavit [15] expresses it best. He was deeply disturbed by Winograd part two, and delivered a melancholy analysis on the day it was published: "Eliyahu Winograd has written a requiem. About a state that... can't decide how to wage the war. A state that doesn't hold a proper discussion about going to war... Israel is again choosing to deceive itself. Quiet in the north, peace within a year, unprecedented prosperity. Indeed, the second Lebanon war ended tonight [with this report]. But it ended with a warning siren, not an all-clear. It's the Winograd warning signal that hardly anyone will hear."

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[2] <http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5gsrqmYmK-luGDWiJWUKCjM9WEmPQ>

[3] <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/854051.html>

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