

## Israel's bleak post-mortem

By Eric Silver,  
Created 2006-08-17 23:00

Ehud Olmert is betting his political future on the shaky foundations of United Nations Security Council resolution 1701, which brought about the 14 August 2006 ceasefire in Israel's second Lebanon war. If it succeeds in fostering a new order in southern Lebanon, the Israeli prime minister may live to fight another day. If it fails, he will probably go the way of Golda Meir, who was forced to resign after her government was caught off-guard by the coordinated Egyptian-Syrian surprise attack that launched the Yom Kippur war [1] in October 1973.

Addressing a sceptical Knesset on 14 August hours after the ceasefire came into effect, Olmert celebrated [2] the UN resolution as a political accomplishment for Israel. "There is no longer a state within a state", he boasted. "There is no longer sponsorship for a terror organisation by a state. And no longer is a terror organisation allowed to operate within Lebanon, as the long arm of the axis of evil which reaches from Tehran to Damascus, uses Lebanon's weakness and transforms it, its citizens and its infrastructure into a tool for its war."

The voters, frustrated at Israel's failure to stifle the rocket threat or bring home the two soldiers kidnapped by Hizbollah on 12 July, remain to be convinced. A poll [3] published on 16 August in the daily paper *Ma'ariv* found only 40% pleased with Olmert's performance, down from a peak of 78% at the end of the first week of hostilities. Asked who won the war, 18% said Israel, 15% Hizbollah and 66% no one. In another poll, published in *Yediot Aharonot* on the same day, 30% thought Israel had won, 30% Hizbollah and 36% neither. It is a measure of the popular disappointment that as recently as 4 August an overwhelming majority of 73.5% were sure of an ultimate Israeli victory.

**Eric Silver is a journalist who has covered Israel for three decades, among others for the *Guardian*, the *Observer*, the *Independent* and the *Jewish Chronicle*. He is the author of a biography of Menachem Begin, published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson in 1984.**

Also by Eric Silver in openDemocracy:

"Israel's political map is redrawn [3]"  
(25 November 2005)

"A united, worried Israel [3]" (21 July 2006)

Amir Peretz, the defence minister, suffered even more of an erosion of confidence than the prime minister. In the *Yediot* poll, 57% called for him to resign, compared with 41% who wanted Olmert to go. Peretz, the Labour party leader, was always a controversial choice for defence. A demagogic former head [4] of the Histadrut trade union federation, he had no security experience. He won the job in the coalition government formed in May 2006 because Olmert wanted to keep the finance and foreign ministries for his own Kadima party. Labour had to receive another top post. Defence was the only one left.

The war proved a cruel test [5] for the argument that a "civilian" defence minister would bring a fresh mind to the post, with no debts and no old scores to settle. Nahum Barnea [6], one of Israel's most influential political commentators, wrote in *Yediot* on 17 August: "The war trumped all the cards. Overnight, Peretz became the public voice of the general staff. He did not understand the language, did not truly appreciate the limits of force, voiced empty threats against the enemy and enthusiastically supported every plan that was put forward by the military."

The voters seemed to agree. If a costly war fails to deliver the goods, they were saying, the defence minister must pay the price, as Moshe Dayan did after the 1973 war. The danger for Labour is that Peretz will drag the party down with him. When the *Ma'ariv* sample were asked who they would vote for if elections were held today, Labour's share of the 120 Knesset seats fell to fifteen from nineteen in the March general election [6].

The rump Likud would gain the most were an election to be held now, rising to twenty seats from twelve. This would put it in second place behind Kadima, which would hold its ground with twenty-nine. Until the ceasefire, Binyamin Netanyahu, the Likud leader, played the part of the loyal opposition, supporting the government and presenting Israel's case in the international media. But once the fighting stopped, he let swing. "We were asleep", he protested [7], "and we received a wake-up call." If the disenchantment spreads to Kadima voters, it could signal the Likud's return to contention, if not to power. Netanyahu could re-establish it as the champion of the centre-right, a role it lost in November 2005 when Ariel Sharon broke away to form Kadima [7].

### **The question of Hizbollah – and Iran**

Resolution 1701 [8] holds the key to these political calculations. By skilfully juggling the diplomatic and the military balls, Olmert ensured that the outcome at the Security Council met more of Israel's requirements than Lebanon's (and by extension Hizbollah's). Olmert kept the United States in his corner, as he had throughout the war. Condoleezza Rice, the US secretary of state, fended off attempts by France, Russia and the Arab League to tilt the resolution more towards Lebanon.

In its final version, it allowed Israeli forces to stay in Lebanon until the Lebanese army, supplemented by a United Nations force, deployed along the border. It allowed Israel to hit back if attacked. It imposed an embargo on the re-supply of arms from Syria to Hizbollah. But it left open the central issue of when and how the *Shi'a* militia would be disarmed. And, above all, it left the international force without teeth.

The signals from Beirut are mixed. Fouad Siniora, Lebanon's prime minister, is flexing his rhetorical muscles. There will, he says, be only one Lebanese army. He began moving his troops south of the Litani [9] on 17 August. But he made it clear that he would not force [10] Hizbollah to disarm. With two Hizbollah ministers in his government, it would be suicidal to even try. Instead, Hizbollah fighters will stay in the south, where many of them live anyway. They agreed, however, to keep their weapons out of sight and allow the army and the UN to deploy [11].

The question for Israel is whether this is a tactical manoeuvre, or a strategic shift as Olmert contended. Hassan Nasrallah, Hizbollah's secretary-general, proclaimed a stunning victory because his men had withstood the mighty Israeli army. But Israeli analysts, like Zvi Shtaubert, director of Tel-Aviv University's Jaffee Centre for Strategic Studies [12], argue that Hizbollah and its *Shi'a* constituency took more of a beating than the sheikh admits. Its losses, in personnel and infrastructure, were far higher than Israel's. Lebanese critics are now questioning Nasrallah's

judgment in provoking the massive Israeli reaction. "Hizbollah at this moment needs a period of silence to rehabilitate itself", [Shtauber](#) [13] says. "So we'll see a lower profile."

That appears to be what's happening now. But how long will the restraint last? Especially if Iran, Hizbollah's sponsor, needs to threaten Israel in order to deter international action against its nuclear weapons programme? Israelis are already bracing themselves for the "next round."

---

**Source URL:**

[http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-middle\\_east\\_politics/postmortem\\_3831.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-middle_east_politics/postmortem_3831.jsp)

**Links:**

[1] [http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/73\\_War.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/73_War.html) target=\_blank

[2] <http://www.israel-mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Speeches+by+Israeli+leaders/2006/Address+to+the+Knesset+by+PM+Ehud+Olmert+regarding+the+war+in+the+north+14-Aug-2006.htm> target=\_blank

[3] <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1154525886276&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull> target=\_blank

[4] <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3285433,00.html> target=\_blank

[5] <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/751448.html> target=\_blank

[6] <http://www.ynetnews.com/headlines/1,7340,L-3140-0,00.html> target=\_blank

[7] <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3291178,00.html> target=\_blank

[8] <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs//2006/sc8808.doc.htm> target=\_blank

[9] <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWB.NSF/db900LargeMaps/SKAR-64GDR5?OpenDocument&cc=Ibn> target=\_blank

[10] <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/751445.html> target=\_blank

[11] <http://today.reuters.com/News/CrisesArticle.aspx?storyId=L17750361> target=\_blank

[12] <http://www.tau.ac.il/jcss/about.html> target=\_blank

[13] <http://www.tau.ac.il/jcss/staff.html> target=\_blank



This article is published by Eric Silver, , and openDemocracy.net under a Creative Commons licence. You may republish it free of charge with attribution for non-commercial purposes following these guidelines. If you teach at a university we ask that your department make a donation. Commercial media must contact us for permission and fees. Some articles on this site are published under different terms.