

Israel: Prime Minister Barak resigns in bid to neutralise his opponents

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Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak announced his resignation December 9. He said he had made the sudden decision in order to seek a fresh electoral mandate to negotiate an agreement with the Palestinians amid the worst Palestinian-Israeli violence in years. It is a desperate act of brinkmanship from Barak, a soldier turned politician, who finds himself backed into a corner.

Barak made his announcement at the end of a 20-minute nationally televised speech and formally tendered his resignation to the president the following day. He portrayed the snap election as a referendum on peace, casting himself as the embodiment of the aspirations of the Israeli people for an end to conflict with the Palestinians. "There are those who cast doubts on the mandate that I received from you, the citizens of Israel, to lead the state of Israel toward true peace agreements and social and economic reforms that will ensure the security and future of all citizens," Barak said. "That mandate is important to me, and I believe it exists."

The resignation came only 10 days after Barak announced he would bring forward general elections from 2003 to early next year, forced on him by repeated votes of no confidence and defections from his One Nation coalition government that had made his position untenable.

He knew that he faced almost certain defeat by Likud in such a general election. In opinion polls before his resignation announcement, Barak was running a close second to Likud's present leader, Ariel Sharon. But by the time of the planned general election, former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would, in all probability, have regained the leadership of Likud—and opinion polls indicated he would easily beat Barak.

Thus Barak's resignation was aimed at avoiding a

general election. Under Israeli law, if the Prime Minister resigns a special election must be held to fill the post within 60 days, and only members of the *Knesset* (parliament) may run. This would eliminate a threat from Netanyahu, who is not presently a *Knesset* member.

In his televised speech, Barak argued against holding a general election by referring to "the emergency situation the state is in" and "the confusion in the *Knesset*". "As Prime Minister I have responsibility for the government's policies," he said. "I see no reason to drag the state through an unnecessary election campaign."

Nevertheless the day after Barak's formal resignation, Netanyahu flew into Israel and announced his intention to first become Likud leader and then mount a legal challenge in order to be able to stand against Barak. He accused Barak of trying to bypass "the will of the nation" by carrying out "the most cynical political trick in the history of Israel. He is resigning in order to prevent the people from freely and democratically electing a new prime minister and Parliament." There will now follow a leadership contest in Likud that will be fought on the basis of warmongering rhetoric between Sharon and Netanyahu. The *Knesset* is considering his appeal to be allowed to stand in the election.

Barak's other major political consideration in resigning is that he faced a leadership challenge, spearheaded by parliamentary speaker Avraham Burg. Sections of the Labour Party are angered by his failure to secure a settlement with the Palestinians and are opposed to his attempts to form a government of national unity with Sharon. By bringing matters to a head, he has forced his internal critics to abandon their plans to oppose him—as well as ending the possibility of

Meretz leader and former “Peace Now” activist Yossi Sarid standing independently due to the pressure to project a common front against Likud.

Such manoeuvring can only escalate political tensions within Israel, at a time when there has been a fresh upsurge of violence in the three-month war against the Palestinians. Since September 28, more than 300 people have been killed and thousands maimed—the overwhelming majority of the casualties are Palestinians and more than one-quarter are children.

Another significant calculation in Barak's resignation announcement is a belief that this will help force Palestinian Authority (PA) leader Yassir Arafat to sign some form of limited accord with Israel. Barak's threat to Arafat is “Deal with me now or face the possibility of Sharon or Netanyahu in power in two months time”. He has made it clear that he wants an agreement as soon as possible and has opposed the calls from the right wing for even more aggressive military action. “The right does not have an alternative security or political plan”, Barak said.

Arafat and his ruling clique have indicated their support for Barak's bid to seek re-election. Bassam Abu Sharif, one of Arafat's advisors, said he hoped that the Prime Minister's re-election would enable a peace deal. “He realises that he is facing a real crisis and dilemma... that military force will not solve the problem, because it needs a political solution,” Sharif said.

This does not mean, however, that Arafat will be able to stem the Palestinian *intifada*. Barak is offering nothing new that could justify Arafat signing an agreement. He has simply reiterated already proposed terms. These include no return to the 1967 borders; 80 percent of the settlers in Judea and Samaria (the West Bank) to remain under Israeli sovereignty; no right of return for Palestinian refugees to Israel and a greater Jerusalem with a Jewish majority recognised by the world as Israel's capital. Barak's only concession to Arafat was that he did not repeat his promise to keep Jerusalem united as the Israeli capital for all eternity.

Leaders of Arafat's Fatah organisation and other Palestinian groups such as Hamas have made clear they are opposed to returning to negotiations and want an end to the Israeli occupation by continuing the *intifada*. One Fatah leader is reported as saying, “Sharon may be a better partner in a war”, since world sympathy and support would then be with the Palestinians.

Barak's terms are also unacceptable to Israel's right wing, which accuses him of giving too much to the Palestinians and offering too much to the Syrians. They will step up their warmongering rhetoric in the coming days and denounce any initiative by Barak as a sell-out.

Another major factor making the resumption of peace talks before the elections unlikely is the political turmoil in the United States. This month, Barak's Justice Minister Yossi Beilin went to Washington to seek President Clinton's help in securing a deal with the Palestinians, only to be told that with the still unresolved presidential election and his own days in office fast expiring, Clinton could do very little. Clinton and his advisors were clearly taken aback by Barak's snap election decision. The White House said that the US remained committed to ending the violence and bringing Israel and Palestine to the negotiating table, but stressed that “what happens between now and the end of the administration is up to the parties in the region.” Former Senator George Mitchell is seeking ways to restart negotiations.



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