

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and the putrefaction of official Israeli politics

Rick Kelly
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Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's four-day visit to Washington last month involved a series of meetings with senior officials, including Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and President George W. Bush. The discussions centred on the Israeli government's plans for annexing part of the West Bank and on the alleged threat of Iran's nuclear program.

Who then is Ehud Olmert?

Unlike former prime minister Ariel Sharon, who gained international notoriety for his record of war crimes against the Palestinians, Olmert remains a largely unknown figure outside of Israel.

He is a career politician who became prime minister after rising through the ranks of the right-wing establishment. Olmert's factional manoeuvring, opportunistic policy shifts and backroom dealings proved more than adequate compensation for his lack of any genuine support from the Israeli electorate. Along the way he has also amassed a considerable personal fortune through his business dealings, many of which involved allegedly corrupt activities. No other member of the Knesset (parliament) has been investigated more often by the police and judicial authorities. Indeed, Olmert's accession to the head of government in Israel testifies to the putrefied state of Zionist politics in Israel.

Olmert was born in British-ruled Palestine in 1945, three years before the state of Israel was founded. His Russian-born father was a gun runner for the Irgun militia, which had fought against British rule and gained notoriety for its terrorist bombing of the King David Hotel in July 1946. In the 1950s, Olmert's father was a member of the Knesset for the Herut Party, which promoted the "Revisionist" Zionism that demanded an expanded "Greater Israel."

Ehud followed his father into right-wing politics and was active in Herut's youth wing. After completing his compulsory military service as an infantry unit officer and graduating from university with a law degree, he was elected to the Knesset in 1973 when he was 28 years old. He sat on a number of Knesset committees before serving in the cabinet of Yitzhak Shamir's Likud-led government between 1988 and 1992.

While Olmert always backed Likud's expansionist and anti-Palestinian policies, he was never regarded as one of the party's ideologues. His business dealings drew more attention than did his politics, particularly those involving the private law firm which he developed in tandem with his political career.

"Olmert used to receive clients while he was an MK [member of the Knesset]," Aryeh Avneri, chairman of the anti-corruption organisation Ometz, told *Haaretz*. "People who wanted shortcuts to various state authorities and bodies hired his expensive services because of his access to Knesset committees and decision makers who dealt with the subjects they were interested in."

Many of Olmert's operations have come under close scrutiny from the authorities. In 1997 he was prosecuted for his alleged role in what was known as the "fictitious invoices" affair. As *Haaretz* explained, in the 1980s, "Likud moneymen had an original method for raising money. They asked businessmen for donations and in return promised them invoices

from advertising firms for services they never received. The donors thus enjoyed the best of both worlds: they bought influence in Likud and they also received an invoice that could be used as a tax deduction."

Olmert was co-treasurer of Likud during this period. Three of his colleagues were jailed for their role in the affair. Olmert was charged with criminal conspiracy and fraud, but was acquitted after the prosecution was unable to disprove his contention that he had been ignorant of his co-workers actions. Insufficient evidence also led the authorities to close the file on a related charge that Olmert had siphoned Likud funds for a private trip to New York for his wife and daughter.

A lack of evidence has stymied a number of investigations into Olmert's affairs. In 2001 police recommended that he be prosecuted for accepting bribes from businessman David Appel. The scandal, known as the "Greek Islands affair," also implicated Ariel Sharon. The attorney general dropped the case in 2004 after a prolonged investigation.

A lengthy *Haaretz* exposé ("With a little help from his friends," published February 23) provided further detail of Olmert's connections with convicted criminals. He is friends with Shlomi Oz, who is referred to as an "underworld figure" in the Israeli press. Oz is alleged to have been involved in racketeering, extortion, and the operation of illegal casinos. When he was sentenced to 32 months imprisonment for his role in a \$2 million counterfeiting operation, Olmert provided the District Court with a written character testimony.

Many of the corruption accusations levelled against Olmert date back to his position as Jerusalem mayor from 1993 to 2003. He appointed a series of his political supporters and financial donors to lucrative municipal positions and worked closely with the city's leading businessmen. "Olmert's Jerusalem was a paradise for contractors and entrepreneurs," *Haaretz* wrote. "Especially if they donated to Olmert."

Olmert's entry into municipal politics came after Likud was defeated in the 1992 general election by Yitzhak Rabin's Labour Party. His mayoral victory was a blow to Rabin, who had declared the election a referendum on his government's negotiations with Yasser Arafat, leader of the Palestine Liberation Organisation.

His record makes nonsense of attempts to refashion him as a man of peace.

Olmert was a prominent opponent of the Oslo Accords, which he described as a "dark cloud" over Jerusalem. His mayoral campaign was based on the demand that Israel should maintain and strengthen its occupation of East Jerusalem, the Palestinian centre seized by Israel in 1967 and which the Palestinians want to be the capital of a future state. His call was directly targeted at the ultra-orthodox and the settlers to mobilise against such an eventuality and establish Israeli dominance not only over the whole of Jerusalem but adjacent land stretching deep into the Occupied Territories.

The new mayor promoted the ongoing expansion of the illegal settlements in East Jerusalem, particularly those adjacent to Maaleh Adumim, the major settlement bloc east of the city. "Although I can't

make political decisions on the issue of Jerusalem—these are the responsibility of the national government—I can make things happen on the ground, like building along the old border and creating continuity of Jewish settlement in East Jerusalem,” Olmert explained. “My decisions on these issues will influence the options available to the government for a political solution for Jerusalem.”

Olmert demolished Palestinian homes in the city that were deemed illegal by the Israeli authorities. Again, the mayor made little secret of his intentions. “I hope there will not be more Arabs living in Jerusalem,” he told Daniel Pipes, director of the neo-conservative Middle East Forum, in 1997. “We already have enough problems in Jerusalem... We do not have the power and the authority to expel them from Jerusalem, but I am not looking for solutions that will bring more and more Arabs to the city. No, that I don’t like.”

In 1996 Olmert oversaw the secret development of a tunnel excavated underneath the Old City district, near the Al Aqsa Mosque, considered one of the holiest sites in Islam. After he posed for the media alongside construction workers completing the tunnel, Palestinian residents of the city erupted in anger. Within three days, 79 Palestinians had been killed and hundreds wounded in clashes with Israeli police and soldiers. The tunnel’s construction, which was rumoured to threaten the foundations of the Al Aqsa Mosque, was widely understood as a major provocation by the recently elected Likud government of Benjamin Netanyahu.

When the second intifada arose in September 2000, Olmert was among those loudly demanding harsh reprisals. In an op-ed piece for the *Wall Street Journal* in June 2002, he demanded the assassination of the Palestinian leadership. “Criminals such as [Fatah security chief] Mr. Dahlan and Arafat can never be reformed; they must be eradicated by force,” he wrote.

When his tenure as Jerusalem mayor ended in 2003, Olmert headed Likud’s general election campaign that same year. Following his re-election to the Knesset he was appointed vice prime minister and minister of industry, trade and labour. In August 2005 he became acting finance minister after Benjamin Netanyahu quit the position in protest over the planned disengagement in Gaza.

Sharon’s “unilateral disengagement” plan involved the removal of an estimated 9,000 settlers together with Israeli military outposts from the Palestinian territory. His strategy was bound up with precluding any negotiations with the Palestinian leadership and securing US backing for Israel’s illegal seizure of 40 to 50 percent of the West Bank. While the disengagement plan aimed at strengthening Israel’s grip over the Occupied Territories, it was met with outraged opposition from pro-settler and fascist elements within Likud. For these layers, the Gaza pullout was an unforgivable betrayal of “Greater Israel.”

Olmert gave his full support to the disengagement plan. Unlike Netanyahu and other senior figures within Sharon’s government, he made no attempt to forge a support base within the settler movement against the prime minister.

The ultra-orthodox and settler movements never fully accepted Olmert as one of their own, notwithstanding his services rendered while mayor of Jerusalem. It was widely understood that Olmert’s loyalties never extended beyond political expediency. For the settlers and the ultra-orthodox, Olmert’s family also counted as a black mark against him. Olmert’s wife has been associated with the left-Zionist Meretz Party and Peace Now. He has two sons—while in the army, one refused to serve in the Occupied Territories, and the other evaded Israel’s compulsory military service by studying in Paris. One of Olmert’s daughters has campaigned for gay and lesbian rights and belongs to an organisation which monitors Israeli soldiers’ treatment of Palestinians at border checkpoints.

When Sharon left Likud last December and formed Kadima, together with former Likud and Labour parliamentarians including Shimon Peres,

Olmert was among the first to declare his allegiance to the new formation and was appointed deputy prime minister. Kadima was immediately hailed by the Israeli media and the political establishment as a realignment of the “centre” that offered a path to peace that would not endanger Israel’s security. The party was widely expected to dominate the Knesset following new elections and no one was surprised that Olmert chose not to remain in the rump Likud.

The rise of Kadima, like that of Olmert himself, reflects the gulf between the demands of the ruling elite and the interests of ordinary Israelis. Politics in Israel is now largely divorced from any semblance of popular control and is dominated by cliques of ultra-wealthy and criminal elements.

Kadima is a party that still does not have any real members—there are no party branches, no factions, and no elections to leading party positions. It is less a party than an electoral machine, relying solely on its ex-Likud and Labour parliamentarians, favourable media coverage, and donations from big business.

As far as the ruling class is concerned, Kadima’s lack of any popular social base is a positive feature, allowing the party to determine its program independently of the interests of working people. Sharon’s new party promised a pro-business, “free market” economic program untainted by concessions either to the trade unions or the welfare demands of the settlers and ultra-orthodox. This agenda was advanced in the context of a general lurch to the right in official Israeli politics, with the Labour Party having abandoned its old social reformist policies, the trade unions shedding members, and the Meretz Party and Peace Now backing Sharon’s disengagement strategy.

Olmert succeeded Sharon after the prime minister suffered a debilitating stroke on January 4. He went on to lead Kadima to victory in the general election held in March, although the party performed much more poorly than had been initially projected. The Labour Party and a number of minor parties ran populist campaigns capitalising on popular hostility to Olmert’s right-wing economic program. The prime minister’s wealthy lifestyle was also targeted—one Labour campaign advertisement declared that the Cuban cigars Olmert smokes cost more than the value of the monthly minimum wage.

But the Labour Party dropped most of its campaign demands following the election and backed Olmert’s formation of an unstable coalition government. Since coming to power, Olmert has fulfilled his stated goal of carrying forward the legacy of Ariel Sharon. The prime minister is already responsible for countless crimes against the Palestinians. Seizing upon Hamas’s election victory in the Palestinian Authority’s legislative elections last January, the Israeli government has launched an unprecedented siege of the West Bank and Gaza, illegally confiscating tens of millions of dollars in Palestinian tax and customs revenue and sealing off the Occupied Territories borders.

A massive humanitarian crisis has ensued, with skyrocketing unemployment and poverty, and increasing cases of malnutrition and hunger being reported. Schools and hospitals are running out of vital supplies, while Palestinian Authority employees have not been paid their salaries for three months. Olmert has also ordered an ongoing artillery bombardment of northern Gaza which has seen residential areas hit and civilians, including young children, killed. Dozens of Palestinian militants have been assassinated in missile attacks that have frequently killed innocent bystanders.

Such is the record of Ehud Olmert, in return for which he was feted in Washington last month.



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