

Recriminations erupt in Israel in aftermath of Lebanon ceasefire

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Bitter infighting has erupted within the Israeli ruling elite following the implementation of the ceasefire in Lebanon on Monday. The inability of the Israeli military to destroy Hezbollah despite its ferocious month-long bombardment has been widely regarded as a political and geo-strategic disaster. According to two different opinion polls, a majority of the population does not believe that Israel achieved its aims in Lebanon.

The government's insistence that the war was a success because Hezbollah has been ordered to disarm has fallen flat, especially after scenes were broadcast of defiant refugees returning to their homes in southern Lebanon waving Hezbollah flags. Hezbollah has indicated that it is unwilling to accept its disarmament and removal from southern Lebanon.

The ensuing recriminations in Israel have threatened the collapse of the Kadima-Labour coalition government. In a Knesset [parliament] session on Monday, held just hours after the UN-sponsored ceasefire resolution took effect, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert admitted "shortcomings" in the way the war had been handled and said there should be a period of "reflection". "We will have to review ourselves in all the battles," he said, amid heckling from opposition politicians. "We won't sweep things under the carpet... The overall responsibility for this operation lies with me, the prime minister."

Despite Olmert's declaration of personal responsibility, the search for a scapegoat is clearly on. Three separate inquiries into the war have been announced. The Israeli military will conduct an internal investigation, the state comptroller is to look into domestic war preparations, and the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee will launch its own probe.

The Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) Chief of Staff Dan Halutz has come under fire for his handling of the situation in Lebanon, and is now embroiled in a scandal that could trigger his dismissal. It has emerged that he sold personal shares on July 12, shortly after Hezbollah captured two Israeli soldiers. Halutz's money was safe as the stock market fell sharply following Israel's subsequent attack on Lebanon.

Defence Minister and Labour leader Amir Peretz is also under fire from within the military and his own colleagues. Labour "old guard" figures, or the "generals and admirals faction" as Peretz supporters call them, never accepted Peretz's accession to the party leadership over Shimon Peres last November. According to Israeli press reports, former Prime Minister Ehud Barak is considering a leadership challenge.

Whatever the fate of Halutz and Peretz, it is clear that the survival of the entire government is at stake. Olmert is already facing calls to resign from commentators in both the right wing and liberal press.

Even before the ceasefire was approved in the UN, *Haaretz* published a front-page comment, titled "Olmert must go", by influential journalist Ari Shavit. "Chutzpah has its limits," he wrote. "You cannot lead an entire nation to war promising victory, produce humiliating defeat and remain in power. You cannot bury 120 Israelis in cemeteries, keep a million Israelis in shelters for a month, wear down deterrent power, bring the next war very close, and then say—oops, I made a mistake. That was not the intention. Pass me a cigar, please."

From the right, Caroline Glick, the *Jerusalem Post's* deputy managing editor, accused the government of delivering Israel the worst defeat in its history. "The Knesset must vote no confidence in this government

and new elections must be carried out as soon as the law permits,” she wrote Monday. “If the Knesset hesitates in taking this required step, then the people of Israel must take to the streets in mass demonstrations and demand that our representatives send Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, Defence Minister Amir Peretz and their comrades out to pasture.”

Such calls have emboldened the right-wing parties. They announced that with the ceasefire in place, the period of “national unity” and cross-party support for the government was over. Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu has rejected an appeal from Kadima’s Knesset speaker Dalia Itzik to help form a national unity government. The extreme right-wing Israel Our Home party similarly refused to join.

Israel Our Home leader Avigdor Lieberman said that he would not form government with Olmert unless he abandoned the “realignment” plan for the West Bank, under which some of the more isolated West Bank settlements will be closed and the residents moved to other settlements behind the separation wall. Netanyahu similarly declared that the “doctrine of unilateral withdrawals had proven to be a failure” and blamed Israel’s withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 and Gaza last year for the crisis.

A fortnight into the Lebanon offensive, Olmert had sparked uproar when he stated that the war would bolster his government’s plans for the West Bank. The right wing and religious parties accused the prime minister of destroying national unity. Ten pro-settler reservists announced that they would refuse orders to enter Lebanon. Moshe Feiglin, the fascistic Likud leadership contender, called on serving soldiers to return to Israel. Olmert was subsequently forced to disavow any connection between the Lebanon war and the West Bank settlements.

Opposition to the government’s strategy in the West Bank is a touchstone for all the right-wing and religious parties in Israel, for which any attempt to delimit the state’s borders is a betrayal of the “Greater Israel” dream. While Olmert has staked his political credibility on the “realignment” plan, it is unclear whether he has majority support for the strategy within his government. A number of Kadima politicians have expressed reservations, while Shas, one of the minor parties in the ruling coalition, has always openly

opposed the plan.

In the aftermath of the Lebanon crisis, Likud and the rightwing have demanded the Israeli Defence Forces should be sent back in to occupy Gaza and even southern Lebanon. Sections of the right-wing political and media establishment are also calling for military action against Syria and Iran.

The war in Lebanon has also exacerbated Israel’s social crisis. The offensive is estimated to have cost \$1.6 billion, and the IDF is clamouring for large increases in annual military spending. Military commanders complained of inadequate equipment and supplies, and some reservists deployed to Lebanon reported that Hezbollah fighters had superior weapons and armour.

The increased military costs will be borne by the Israeli working class. Cuts have already been imposed on the education ministry, and further reductions in social spending will inevitably follow. The finance ministry’s director-general, Yossi Bachar, has already announced that no additional taxes will be imposed and neither will the budget deficit be allowed to increase. “This is to send a message to the markets that we are consistent and maintain our policy,” he declared.

The government’s measures will further worsen Israel’s high unemployment and poverty rate and deepen social inequality. The need to cut social spending will also further expose the fault lines within the government. Coalition members, including Labour, Shas, and the Pensioners Party, campaigned in last January’s general election on the basis of increasing social spending and reversing previous pro-business reforms. Now these parties face the prospect of helping implement policies directly opposed to the demands of their constituents, further exacerbating sharp tensions and divisions within the ruling coalition.



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