

Israel: Government on ropes after report condemns Olmert and Peretz over Lebanon war

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The interim report of the Winograd Commission into Israel's initial conduct of its 33-day war against Lebanon in July and August last year has lambasted the country's political and military leadership for what is regarded within ruling circles as a debacle.

The report singles out Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Defence Minister Amir Peretz and the now retired chief of staff, Dan Halutz, for the failure of Israel's military forces to rescue the two soldiers seized by Hezbollah—the ostensible purpose of the war. The report stops short of calling for Olmert or Peretz to step down.

The commission's main criticism is that the war did not achieve the stated aims of freeing the captured soldiers and stopping Hezbollah from firing rockets into Israel. But the commission then makes numerous criticisms as to the actual conduct of the ground offensive that was mounted, its lack of preparation, and how this proved detrimental to securing the release of those detained.

The commission is unable to explain these errors, however, because it must remain silent on the war's real objective—the elimination of Hezbollah as a fighting or political force within Lebanon, for which the seizure of Israeli personnel only provided a *casus belli*.

This aim was in turn part of a wider objective in which Lebanon was to be reduced to a vassal of the United States and Israel, and ultimately “regime change” achieved in Syria and Iran, thus ensuring Israel's position in this oil-rich region as Washington's policeman. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had admitted as much when she called the war part of the creation of a “new Middle East.”

Neither does the commission have anything to say about Israel's disproportionate response to the abductions: the destruction of Lebanon's civilian infrastructure—its roads, bridges, power stations, water treatment plants—and the murderous aerial bombardment of Shia towns and villages in the south of the country. These were war crimes committed against a defenceless civilian population. The commission is likewise silent about the appalling and unequal death toll: more than 1,200 Lebanese killed with many more injured, compared to 160 Israelis.

The setting up of the commission was an attempt by Olmert to limit the political fallout from the war. One of several minor inquiries set up to examine operational aspects of the war, its five members were handpicked by the Olmert government, and its original chairman was the former head of Mossad, Israel's secret service.

Eliyahu Winograd, an 81-year-old judge, was only brought in to head up the commission to deflect criticism after tens of thousands of people went onto the streets of Tel Aviv in September to call for the widening of the commission's terms of reference and to demand a

national commission of inquiry. Such an inquiry would have had the power to demand the sacking of ministers, as had the Kahan Commission in 1983 after it found Defence Minister Sharon personally responsible for the massacre of hundreds of Palestinian refugees in Sabra and Shatilla, in the suburbs of Beirut, by Israel's fascist allies—the Phalange.

Despite its limited remit, the commission's report has serious repercussions for Olmert's Kadima-led coalition with Labour.

While much of the report's 250 pages remain classified, its conclusion sets out the real concerns of the Zionist elite about the armed forces. It states that Israel's armed forces were “not ready for this war. Some of the political and military elites in Israel have reached the conclusion that Israel is beyond the era of wars; that it had enough military might and superiority to deter others from declaring war against her; these would also be sufficient to send a painful reminder to anyone who seemed to be undeterred; since Israel did not intend to initiate a war, the conclusion was that the main challenge facing the land forces would be low intensity asymmetrical conflicts.”

This raises “questions that stand at the centre of our existence here as a Jewish and democratic state,” the report states.

It continues, “The primary responsibility for these serious failings rests with the prime minister, the minister of defence and the [outgoing] chief of staff...”

“The prime minister bears supreme and comprehensive responsibility for the decisions of ‘his’ government and the operations of the army,” the report states. “The prime minister made up his mind hastily, despite the fact that no detailed military plan was submitted to him and without asking for one. Also, his decision was made without close study of the complex features of the Lebanon front and of the military, political and diplomatic options available to Israel. He was responsible for the fact that the goals of the campaign were not set out clearly and carefully, and there was no serious discussion of the relationship between these goals and the authorised modes of military action.”

It continues, “In making the decision to go to war, the government did not consider the whole range of options, including that of continuing the policy of ‘containment,’ or combining political and diplomatic moves with military strikes below the ‘escalation level,’ or military preparations without immediate military action—so as to maintain for Israel the full range of responses to the abduction.”

The report criticises Chief of Staff Halutz for acting “impulsively.” He “did not alert the political echelon to the serious shortcomings in the preparedness and the fitness of the armed forces for an extensive

ground operation.”

The commission states that Defence Minister Peretz lacked military, political and governmental knowledge and experience, and “failed in fulfilling his functions.”

Much of the criticism of Olmert and Peretz centres around or alludes to their non-military background. In effect, the commission is demanding that only senior military figures are capable of holding the top jobs in government. It also urges that Israel’s land-based forces be expanded in expectation of long ground operations in the future, irrespective of the wishes of the broad mass of the population. It presages huge political and economic struggles within Israel.

The report, coming after the war against Lebanon, has done far more than place a question mark over the survival of Olmert, Peretz and the government. It has brought to a head a long-term political crisis within the Israeli state as a whole.

The failed war against Hezbollah demonstrated the underlying weakness and vulnerability not only of Israel’s political leadership but its military, intelligence and civil defence services under conditions where new strikes against Hezbollah and even military action against Iran are in active preparation by Washington and Jerusalem.

Israel’s intelligence services underestimated Hezbollah’s fighting capacity, the number and range of their missiles and the efficiency and effectiveness of their fighters, as well as the support they commanded within Lebanon. The military had relied, the commission notes, on massive aerial bombardment to achieve its ends. But as the United States and Britain found to their cost in Iraq, this proved inadequate to the task of subduing the population. And, again as in Iraq, their ground forces were simply not up to the task.

Israel’s military has grown used to fighting low-intensity operations against unarmed or poorly armed Palestinians, where brutality directed against a poorly equipped irregular force and unarmed civilians is the order of the day. In Lebanon it was not prepared, equipped and trained for long land-based operations against a more substantial military opponent. Moreover, a largely conscript army of young people, supplemented by older reservists, contained many soldiers that did not agree with going to war in Lebanon and did not want to fight in it.

This last factor in particular is rooted in the phenomenal growth of social differences in Israel as a result of the free-market policies pursued by successive governments. This has objectively weakened the strength of the demand for national and political unity against those deemed to be the external “enemies” of the Jewish people, which is the essential foundation of Zionism.

This social schism is even revealed in the state of Israel’s civil defences: its shelters and supplies in the northern cities and towns that came under attack from Hezbollah’s rockets. Civil defences, along with all essential public services, have all but disappeared as privatisation, deregulation and financial cutbacks, not to mention bribery and corruption, have taken their toll. This meant that while those citizens who had the money or family and friends in the south with whom they could take shelter fled, the poor and the elderly were left with little or no protection or supplies. In addition, the majority of Israel’s Arab citizens live in the north, and it was they who suffered disproportionately from Hezbollah’s rockets.

It was the government’s callous indifference to the plight of its citizens that was one of the most important factors contributing to the popular pressure for a commission of inquiry. Needless to say, these issues did not figure in the report delivered by the Winograd Commission.

Already hit hard by high-profile corruption scandals, Olmert has the lowest popularity ratings—at 3 percent—of any Israeli prime minister. Although admitting that the report was “grave” and “harsh,” he has refused to resign. But the demand for him to do so has been raised across the political spectrum, including by his likely successor as leader of Kadima, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni.

So far, however, only 3 of the party’s 29 parliamentarians have failed to back Olmert. Their fear is that if he goes now then the government too might fall. The Labour Party has not as yet called for his resignation, given their own involvement in the Lebanon debacle.

Labour leader and Defence Minister Amir Peretz failed to attend yesterday’s special Knesset session to discuss the Winograd report, and there is speculation that he could resign shortly. Regardless, he will most likely be replaced as Labour leader after internal elections later this month, where the victor is likely to be either former prime minister Ehud Barak or retired admiral and former Shin Bet internal security chief Ami Ayalon. Labour might even have to pull out of the coalition altogether, calculating that a loss of office is better than association with Kadima at this point.

Ayalon has pledged that he will withdraw the Labour ministers from the coalition if Olmert does not quit. There is great reluctance to take such a step, given indications that the main political beneficiary of Kadima’s difficulties thus far has been the right-wing opposition Likud, under Binyamin Netanyahu. Kadima split from Likud under Ariel Sharon just over two years ago. This is not a mark of Netanyahu’s popularity. He is widely hated and has the backing of only a quarter of respondents in a recent Channel 2 poll. But his opponents in Kadima and Labour have even less support.

Yesterday evening tens of thousands attended a demonstration in Rabin Square, Tel Aviv calling for the resignation of Olmert and Peretz. One of its main organisers was former national security adviser Uzi Dayan, head of the Tafnit party/movement. Claiming to be non-political, the rally’s function was in fact to channel inchoate opposition to war and cuts in social programs into the same conduits as right-wing forces demanding the more efficient conduct of warfare and an escalation of Jewish settlement construction in the Occupied Territories.

Politicians were not allowed to speak at the rally but were asked to attend in support. If this decision had not been taken, Netanyahu would have been a featured speaker.

The rogues gallery now assembling to offer themselves as replacements for Olmert and Peretz—internally and on the opposition benches—testify to the absence of any genuine vehicle to express the social and democratic concerns of Israeli workers. On the war question, the only lesson that Israel’s ruling elite wants to be drawn is that the preparation for further acts of aggression in the Middle East must be better planned and carried through to a successful conclusion in alliance with the US. It will be ordinary Israeli citizens and the peoples of the Middle East that will pay the bloody price.



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