



Olmert's Palestinian Failures

Efraim Inbar

BESA Center Perspectives Papers No. 74, March 26, 2009

<http://www.biu.ac.il/SOC/besa/perspectives74.html>

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Ehud Olmert lurched from unilateralism to final status negotiations to military conflict with the Palestinians, and failed in all three tracks. His failure in dealing effectively with Hamas in Gaza is the most strategically ominous. As Olmert departs, he bequeaths to his successors the need to deal with Hamas in Gaza and to grope for alternative ways to address the perennial Palestinian question in the West Bank. He did not move Israel further ahead on either front.

Unilateralism

In 2006, the new Kadima party ran an election campaign advocating unilateralism on the Palestinian issue, arguing that the 2005 withdrawal from Gaza and from parts of Samaria should be emulated in other areas of the West Bank. Kadima leaders Ehud Olmert (who succeeded Ariel Sharon after his incapacitation), and the future foreign minister, Tzipi Livni, extolled the virtues of unilateralism.

This unilateralism was based on the premise that the PLO was not a credible partner for negotiations and lacked the ability to implement an agreement. Therefore, it was argued, Israel should unilaterally define its borders in order to maintain a Jewish and democratic state and disengage from the violent, corrupt and inept Palestinian society.

This approach dovetailed with the conventional wisdom in Israel. Israelis expressed an increasing level of skepticism about reaching a peace agreement

with the dysfunctional Palestinian national movement. The years of Palestinian terrorism since September 2000, the chaos within the Palestinian Authority, and the ascendance of the radical Hamas in Palestinian politics, had led to the sober assessment that the Palestinian national movement was incapable of making the concessions needed for a historical compromise with the Zionist movement, even at the cost of painful Israeli concessions. To a large extent, this general mood explains the success of Kadima in the 2006 elections.

As the 2005 summer withdrawal from Gaza was fully coordinated with the Americans, the Olmert government's initial preferences were in line with the policies of the Bush administration, which showed reluctance to get involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and shared Israel's skepticism about the Palestinians as a serious interlocutor. After all, Washington was wont to express unilateralism in its own foreign policy.

The Annapolis Process

The fiasco of the Second Lebanon War in summer 2006 and Olmert's legal troubles diverted the attention of the prime minister to matters of personal political survival. Olmert succeeded in politically surviving the reverberations of the failure in Lebanon partly by renewing negotiations with the PLO – a move backed by a sudden change of heart on the part of the American administration, led not surprisingly by Secretary Condoleezza Rice's State Department.

The diplomatic vehicle for this was the Annapolis conference and process, convened in November 2007 by the US, to jumpstart negotiations between Israel and the PLO under the problematic assumption that progress was needed toward a two-state solution. The ambitious initiative even set a one year deadline for reaching an agreement.

Annapolis was, however, a hopeless diplomatic exercise, as the PLO retained its political impotence. In fact, the planned product of the process – a "shelf agreement" – tacitly recognized the futility of the process. In other words, the US and the international community realized the most that could be achieved was an agreement to be placed on the "shelf" until the Palestinians displayed the political acumen for its implementation. Nevertheless, Olmert and Livni wasted many hours with their PLO interlocutors, continuing to pay lip service to the two-state solution paradigm despite its obsolescence.

Annapolis reinforced the view that the Palestinians are unable to make needed compromises. In fact, just last week Olmert squarely blamed the Palestinians for the failure.

Unfortunately, much of the international community is reluctant to admit that the two-state paradigm is defunct. The Palestinian predicament can only be alleviated by the adoption of alternative workable schemes.

In any case, the Annapolis process caused limited harm. Most Israelis view it as part of a "conflict management" approach to keeping the conflict in check, on a low-as-possible flame. For this reason, most Israelis were not perturbed even by the news that Olmert was discussing the partition of Jerusalem. More than two-thirds of Israelis strongly oppose any re-division of Jerusalem, yet few took Olmert's talks seriously. The Annapolis process was simply viewed as hot air and smoke without fire.

Confronting Hamas in Gaza

If Olmert's mishandling of the political process with the Palestinians can be dismissed as relatively harmless, his handling of the Gaza arena cannot. Here the Olmert government badly blundered.

Partially in response to misguided American prodding, Olmert committed an original sin of allowing Hamas, an organization intent on destroying Israel, to take part in the 2006 Palestinian elections. The Hamas electoral victory aggravated the political paralysis within the PA and was a prelude to the Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip in June 2007. In the meantime, Gazans fired thousands of Qassam rockets into Israel, making the lives of hundreds of thousands of Israelis unbearable. Hamas' rule in Gaza brought about an escalation in the number and lethality of missiles aimed at Israeli civilians.

Instead of taking harsh economic and military measures to force the Gazans to behave, the Olmert government foolishly continued to supply water and electricity as well as to allow goods to enter Gaza. Moreover, after failing to end the Qassam threat by limited military responses, the Olmert government entered into indirect negotiations with Hamas via Egypt to secure a fragile ceasefire. During the ceasefire Hamas, an Iranian proxy, increased its military capabilities and consolidated its grip over Gaza, rendering the split in the Palestinian body politic a fait accompli.

When Hamas further escalated its attacks on Israeli civilian targets after the ceasefire ended in November 2008, Olmert's government finally took serious military action the next month. While the military performed much better than in 2006, the political-strategic handling of Operation Cast Lead was poor. Hamas was not hit hard enough to truly hurt or disrupt the organization, and its missile fire against Israel continued. Indeed, Israel's failure to administer a

more serious blow to Hamas disappointed the US and the moderate Arab regimes.

Olmert's failures in Lebanon and in Gaza are strategically more ominous than his predictable lack of success in reaching an agreement with the PA. As Olmert departs, he bequeaths his successors the need to deal with Hamas in Gaza and to grope for alternative ways to address the perennial Palestinian question in the West Bank. He did not move Israel further ahead on either front.

Efraim Inbar is professor of political science at Bar-Ilan University and director of the Begin-Sadat (BESA) Center for Strategic Studies. An earlier version of this article was published on March 23, 2009 by www.bitterlemons.org.

BESA Perspectives is published through the generosity of the Littauer Foundation