
The Summer of Our Discontent

Israeli Politics and the Lebanon War

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The idea that the war in Lebanon this past summer was an unforeseen event, still widely accepted by many Israelis, strikes me as naïve at best. Thumbing through the headlines from the months leading up to the conflict, you cannot avoid news of increasing friction at the border, whether in the form of attempts to abduct Israeli soldiers, firing of Katyusha rockets at both Israeli towns and Israel Defense Forces (IDF) bases,¹² possible Israeli involvement in assassinations of Palestinian militants in Lebanon,³ or bellicose statements from both sides of the fence.^{4,5} Like a rollercoaster ride you've been strapped to for the past 60 years, it would be disingenuous to claim you did not expect the upcoming turn.

Not a surprise then, but still an eye-opener in many respects, the war in Lebanon revealed many truths Israelis had preferred to deny or repress over the past few years. Commonly held beliefs, some of them at the core of the popular consensus, were shown to be patently misguided. Like most people, Israelis do not like to be awoken from agreeable states of denial, and so the summer of 2006 will be best remembered as the summer when no one was pleased. The government, politicians, soldiers and their commanders, the media, taxi drivers—everyone felt their collective system of convictions crashing against the unheroic light of reality. The result was a cacophony of criticism and

complaints, a media all too willing to relay everyone and anyone's grievances, and the general sense of something gone wrong.

Many Israelis believed that the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000 would mark an end to the country's long and messy involvement in the land to the north. Although the move was driven by pressure from the Israeli public, seeing no sense in the almost daily death of soldiers in a land they had no claim to, many also hoped that this step would bring about stability and calm. However, the concept of unilateral disengagement from occupied territories as a panacea for problems that go back 60 years was proven wrong almost as soon as it was implemented, as the hostilities between Hezbollah and the IDF never abated. Unfortunately, the failed unilateral disengagement model continued to guide the actions of the Israeli government, leading to the non-negotiated Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in August 2005. Once again, rather than trading weapons for discussion, this move simply resulted in the substitution of one weapon for another—rockets instead of short-range mortars, artillery rounds in place of close combat.

Another conviction hurt by the events of this past summer relates to the status of the Israeli military, the IDF. The conflict exposed a long list of deficiencies and failed policies in the IDF, from the strategic level of decision making by the chief of staff to the operational and tactical aspects of maintaining troop preparedness, issuing consistent and unambiguous orders, and supplying provisions to combat zones. Many of the IDF's actions appeared to be carried out for media consumption alone, and the words of its commanders amounted to no more than election day propaganda. One striking example was Chief of Staff Dan Halutz's assertion in the middle of the war that Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah would "carefully consider" the words of his next speech.⁶ Despite these problems, the unique relationship between the Israeli public and the military allows for temporary fluctuations in the public's outlook without changes in the underlying view of the IDF. The immortal words of David Ben-Gurion, "May every Jewish mother know that she has put her son under the

care of commanders who are up to the task,⁷⁷ will most likely withstand the summer storm.

There is one public institution in Israel, however, which seems to have been terminally damaged in the course of the war and during the following months—namely, the country’s elected officials. The deeply rooted myth that Israeli politicians are somehow of a different make from your run-of-the mill handshaking, baby-kissing pols more familiar from other Western democracies, that they are statesmen in the traditional sense: “A male political leader regarded as a disinterested promoter of the public good,”⁷⁸ was laid to rest. Former prime ministers Menachem Begin, Yitzhak Shamir, Yitzhak Rabin, and those who came before them all conveyed the image of a grandfather who knew what would best serve Israel’s interests, and would accordingly put these interests before anything else. This iconic representation of the country’s leaders was willingly preserved by the media and thus adopted by most of the public, regardless of its accuracy. True, prime ministers Ehud Barak and Binyamin Netanyahu, representatives of the younger and more cynical generation, did manage to infiltrate the highest echelons of Israeli government. However, these stints were short-lived and marred by controversy, with Barak replacing Netanyahu, only to lose to Ariel Sharon in the 2001 elections. Thus began the sustained rule of the last of the dinosaurs, a controversial figure to say the least, who nonetheless managed to create an aura of personal responsibility towards the state and its people. The public tended to overlook Sharon’s alleged transgressions,⁹ viewing him as one of the founders of the state and thus by and large immune from criticism.

Fast forward to January 2006, and the statesman is suddenly no more. It is the age of the “spin,” the current buzz word in Hebrew, when political actions are viewed as mere ploys to gain short-term public approval. This change came about, at least in the public’s perception, with the incapacitation of Sharon in January and his replacement by a politician known more for his blandness than any extraordinary achievement, former Jerusalem mayor Ehud Olmert. Ushered into his job by sheer chance, Olmert has not only displayed a

lack of leadership skills, he has also proven himself to be a mediocre politician. From his first decisions as prime minister, including the appointment of Labor Party head Amir Peretz as Minister of Defense, through his claims at the beginning of the war that Israel would not suspend its actions until the return of the captured soldiers, to his post-hoc insistence that everything had gone according to plan, Olmert has established himself as embarrassingly myopic. His persistent attempts to convince the public that his actions were the correct ones have fallen on deaf ears for the most part, and his contention that he bears full responsibility for the war and its consequences¹⁰ simply begs the question: why has he not resigned? Taking a further step towards losing the last of his credibility, Olmert declared in interviews given for the Jewish New Year that “The prime minister is supposed to run the country; he doesn’t have to have an agenda.”¹¹ Mahatma Gandhi once noted: “Seven blunders of the world that lead to violence: wealth without work, pleasure without conscience, knowledge without character, commerce without morality, science without humanity, worship without sacrifice, politics without principle.”¹² The last thing Israel needs now is a politician without principle, a CEO who sees himself as responsible for only the day-to-day management of the state.

Olmert’s behavior is especially surprising given his tendency, like others among the current political establishment, to heavily rely on consultants and polling in reaching decisions and interacting with the public.¹³ Are these advertising gurus wrong in their analysis of the public mindset and their advice on how to address the problematic situation the prime minister has found himself in? Or have they simply been unable to control their boss, allowing him to express himself and act in opposition to their counsel? Most probably, a bit of both.

The widespread disapproval of his handling of the war and his mumbled reaction to criticism have made Olmert the second most unpopular politician in Israeli history,^{14,15} only barely squeaking past his sidekick Peretz, leaving the commentators dumbfounded as to the reasons for his inexplicable staying

power. Indeed, while the pundits' reaction to his Rosh Hashanah round of interviews was harsh,¹⁶ the general public remained mostly silent. Three factors may play a role in this surprising situation. First, most other current Israeli politicians were carved out of the same mold. Their desire to cling to power, and the maneuvers they employ to this end, know no bounds. The most obvious example has been the readiness of Avigdor Lieberman's extreme right-wing Yisrael Beitenu party to partner with Olmert, and, likewise, the Labor Party's willingness to remain in this tattered coalition. A second factor behind Olmert's resilience is the fact that large portions of the Israeli populace have become disenchanted with their leaders and the political system in general. The expected indictment of President Moshe Katsav on charges of rape and the ongoing trials of two justice ministers have all but depleted any faith that the public had in its elected officials.¹⁷ Rather than join protest movements or participate in demonstrations, many have chosen to disengage from the political process altogether, thus preventing the calls for Olmert's resignation from gaining any real traction. Finally, the Lebanon war once again brought up the existential fear shared by many Israelis. The almost daily rants from Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, together with talk among Israeli leaders about the necessity to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons,¹⁸ do not help soothe the collective psyche, and many prefer a second-rate government to "rocking the boat" in such a potentially volatile situation.

Given his precarious status and unwillingness to initiate any major political plans in the foreign arena, Olmert has apparently decided to focus inwards, embarking on attempts to broaden his coalition, as well as proposing sweeping reforms to the Israeli political system¹⁹—arguably just a move to keep his head above water for another few months. Time will tell how long the Israeli public is willing to put up with a prime minister who thinks he is managing some sports team—and one playing in the European leagues, no less. Unfortunately for Olmert and many Israelis who live under the illusion that Israel is part of Europe, geography is stronger than any vacation spent in

London or an Italian piazza constructed outside one's house. Fences, walls and unilateral withdrawals are a temporary solution at best, and tending to internal issues is no excuse for avoiding any attempt to deal with the pressing matters waiting on the other side. Lebanon may be an intractable issue at this moment, but don't all the problems Israel has with its neighbors seem just as hopeless?

Whether or not we accept the prevailing view in the Arab world that the Palestinian issue is the root cause of all these problems, it is still an issue that must be addressed, sooner rather than later. The Israelis largely ignore the daily events in the territories and the Israeli towns in their vicinity, remaining quietly insulated from the distant gunfire and rockets whistling in the air. Moreover, the Palestinian Intifada that has for all intents and purposes come to an end did not leave much of a mark. Similar to assessments of the impact of 9/11 on the US and the world,^{20,21} it seems that terrorism once again fails to live up to its reputation. No one denies the setbacks suffered by the economy, the transformations in the political scene, the genuine fear many feel and the small changes some make in their daily lives. But habituation is a mighty mechanism, even for us humans. Ordinary Israelis went on living their lives even through the horrible months of early 2002, and for the majority that period is now no more than a memory.

The short-term memory of most people has regrettably pervaded the government as well. Judging from his actions since the end of the war, or more accurately the lack thereof, one cannot avoid the conclusion that Olmert has given up on any effort to seriously engage the Palestinians. Abandoning the convergence plan, whatever its merits or shortcomings, he unequivocally signaled that he intends to maintain the status quo. Unfortunately, in the language of Middle Eastern politics, status quo is a nonentity. What you put off today will come back to haunt you tomorrow.

Three months have passed since the end of the Second Lebanon War, and Israelis are still preoccupied with its consequences, uneasy about its management, worried about what lies ahead. Perhaps a blessing in disguise,

the summer of 2006 debunked notions that had been left unchallenged for too long—the misguided, supposedly easy solutions to the Israeli-Arab conflict, the belief in a perfect military capable of fighting wars without mistakes and casualties, the erroneous comparison of the lopsided combat with the Palestinians to that on other fronts. The problems are now out in the open, beckoning to be addressed.

On the eve of the national elections in March, Olmert pledged to make Israel “a country that’s fun to live in.”²² It may require audacity and moves grounded in principles rather than politics, but he still has a chance to redeem himself and his government by at least trying to make good on his promise.

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Notes

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