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## Mr. Olmert Comes to Washington: What is Not on the Agenda, What Is, and What Should Be

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A Weekly Briefing on Israeli and Middle Eastern Affairs

Ehud Olmert—a seasoned visitor to Washington—has by now arrived in America for the first time as prime minister. Gone are his earlier, carefree days and ways. He now carries, in his talks with President George W. Bush and his administration as well as in his address to the joint houses of Congress (in itself, an unusual honor for a first visit), the awesome responsibility for the future of the Jewish people, which goes with the job: "Not just the next three years," Ariel Sharon used to tell his guests, but "the next 30, 300, 3000." There are immense issues in play. Equally important are the issues off the agenda, left open to future discussion and decisions. Preparations have been intense and secret, yet here is a simplified assessment of what is at stake at this stage.

It is perhaps best to suggest, first of all, that some of the subjects that have been the focus of much speculation at earlier stages will not be discussed—or rather, not in the specific form they were expected to be raised:

\* To begin with, there will be no detailed discussion (as yet), maps on the table and plans in hand, of the "convergence" concept—the need for Israel in the absence of reliable Palestinian interlocutors to take further steps, i.e., further withdrawals, toward the unilateral creation of a two-state solution—central as it may be for Olmert's political purpose and the future of his party and his government. The plans are not yet there, and would require an intense internal debate, with moderate settlers and with various other sectors of Israeli society, before they take shape. Meanwhile, the American agenda is equally crowded, as the preparatory team found out when they arrived last week; and the hopes, cherished by some in Israel, that the U.S. will commit itself to support a future recognition of unilaterally drawn borders, rests on a misreading of the (highly significant) exchange of letters between President Bush and Ariel Sharon on April 14, 2004. The U.S. cannot "give" Israel territorial gains: It can offer support for interim measures, and it does support the basic Israeli interpretation of UN Security Council Resolution 242—i.e., the prospect for territorial compromise. But the prospect for negotiations, within some version of the Road Map, remains central to American strategy— and unlikely to be abandoned right now, when Mahmoud Abbas is locked in what could become a real battle in the streets of Gaza with Hamas and what it stands for.

\* Under these circumstances, there will also be no discussion on aid packages or loan guarantees. For Israel, it is premature to put a price tag on measures that are yet to be determined; and in Washington, all budgetary issues are now sufficiently sensitive to warrant putting them off as long as possible.

\* Finally, there will be no discussion this time of military measures against Iran. True, when the time comes for such action—as well it might—neither the U.S. (nor the international coalition) nor Israel will be able to act without alerting the other, because the ayatollahs' vengeance will fall upon all anyway. But that time has not come yet.

What will take place on the key questions—above all, Iran; as well as on the future of Israeli-Palestinian relations and other regional issues—will be more in terms of mutual and personal understandings on first principles: on the danger implicit in the Iranian nuclear drive (an existential threat, not only to Israel, but to the region and to the world order, which would surely overshadow all other questions); on the need to ensure that the Hamas government come to be perceived by its own people as a failure; on the commitment on both sides to keep alive the prospect of a two-state solution—ironically, whether the Palestinians like it or not; and on the future of the "American project" to promote the political transformation of the region, whose fate now hangs upon the tragic situation in Iraq.

Where discussions may well get more specific is over short-term policy design questions regarding the welfare of the Palestinians and the best ways to prevent a crisis, while still putting the squeeze on Hamas. Not an easy task: Press too hard and the Palestinian Authority, already at the edge of civil war, might collapse, leaving a legacy of anarchy, widespread violence, and an open invitation to Al-Qa`ida and its likes to fish in the murky waters of Gaza. Do too little and Hamas will crow that they have indeed won the battle for international legitimacy and the Jews have once again retreated in shame. It is important, amid all this, to seek some common ground with those elements of Palestinian society that one day, maybe, could emerge as a liberal alternative to both the Party of Thieves (Fatah) and the Party of Murderers (Hamas), and to maintain trade relations with the thin semblance of a middle class that is still out there.

Hence Olmert's decision, brewed in the complex interaction between his office and those of Tzippi Livni (Foreign Affairs) and Amir Peretz (Defense), to take the risks involved in reopening the Karni Crossing for trade—despite a general warning that the people working there might again be targeted by terrorists. This attentive attitude toward the needs of Palestinian noncombatants is not easily sold to an Israeli public that faces the threat of terror attacks and Qassam launches (just yesterday, a rocket fell directly into a school in S'derot, but luckily did not explode), but it is bound to be appreciated in Washington.

There should be more to the agenda, moreover, than just the mundane sorting out of existing threats. There is a subtle change in the manner in which Israeli policymakers (or at least some of them) have come to think, in recent years, about the bilateral relationship and its place in the broader scheme of things. The time may have come, and this could be a theme in Olmert's speech before Congress, for Israel to appear in Washington not as a supplicant but as a partner:

\* In pursuit of the global struggle against a common and vicious enemy—totalitarian Islamism, as it should be properly called—against which there needs to emerge a broader community of "like-minded nations," as the UN has failed to provide the necessary unity of purpose. Israel would be well positioned to contribute, in many significant ways, to such an enterprise, having been in the forefront of this effort for years.

\* In the concomitant campaign to reduce, and perhaps one day remove, the world's dependence on Middle Eastern fossil fuels (and quite specifically, at this time, Iranian oil). With remarkable scientific and technological capacities, which now need to be translated into large-scale projects, Israel can closely cooperate with the U.S. in offering new ideas, particularly in the field of solar energy, as well as in the recycling, conservation, and innovative uses of existing sources. The creative drive that for so long was directed to the art of war should now be channeled toward "the moral equivalent of war"—changing the nature of the energy market—which may well prove as decisive for our future as any of our battles of old.