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EHUD OLMERT'S VISIT TO WASHINGTON: REALIGNMENT DELAYED

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Prime Minister Ehud Olmert rushed off to Washington before his government was even three weeks old. His visit apparently had four main aims: to hold the launch ceremony in the White House which is necessary to entrench the status of any new Israeli Prime Minister; to establish a personal link with President George W. Bush; to get Bush's blessing for the centerpiece of his policy agenda – his convergence plan; and to discuss the Iranian nuclear threat.

The personal and media objectives were achieved. The visit went off without a hitch, the Prime Minister was warmly received, his speech to a joint session of Congress was greeted enthusiastically, the President allotted him a big chunk of time, and some chemistry was established between the two men. With respect to the Iranian threat, everything that should have been said publicly was said: Iran must not be allowed to develop a nuclear capability, the US will help defend Israel, and intelligence ties will be upgraded. If other things were said behind closed doors, the parties obviously preferred to keep them from the public. As expected, the question of convergence was the most important substantive issue on the agenda and on this issue, the visit seems to have capped a real shift in priorities and timetables.

In the early stages of planning, Olmert's aides hoped that he would get the President's approval for the idea of convergence, on the basis of which he could then proceed to work out details with the Administration. That hope was based on what seemed like a joint US-Israeli assessment of Abu Mazen's weakness and Hamas' rejectionism. However, when it emerged that the US was not yet ready to endorse convergence before some other conditions were met, the Prime Minister had to close ranks with the Americans.

Olmert had initially declared that he wanted to set Israel's permanent borders, if not through negotiations with the Palestinians, then unilaterally. But the "if" part was apparently little more than lip-service. According to the roadmap, negotiations with the Palestinians require them first to dismantle the terrorist organizations. Even before the Palestinian Legislative Council elections in January, Abu Mazen seemed unable (and perhaps unwilling) to do that, and Hamas' victory in the elections finally buried any chance that he would try. Consequently, Olmert's tacit implicit assumption was that any attempt to negotiate would simply be a waste of time and that he should therefore move on convergence as quickly as possible.

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The Americans rejected this approach. Both before and during the visit, they stressed that it was too early for a presidential endorsement. As Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice explained, "The Prime Minister has no program. He said that he wants to share some ideas with the President." Even after her meeting with Olmert, she declared that "We don't expect to adopt any specific points" because there are still "a lot of questions" about the plan. Rice was referring to weighty matters such as the redeployment lines, the fate of the Jordan Valley, freedom of maneuver for the IDF in areas to be evacuated, settlement plans in area E1 which could break Palestinian territorial contiguity, the implications for Jordan, control of border passages, etc.

Apart from the fact that the focus was on an idea rather than a plan, the US plainly preferred to focus first on the bilateral for at least three reasons. First of all, notwithstanding agreement over Abu Mazen's weakness, he remains the only obstacle to a complete Hamas takeover and should therefore be strengthened rather than weakened by a unilateral Israeli move. Secondly, the future of the Hamas government is still uncertain; it might turn to moderation or it might collapse. Finally, the US seeks to narrow any gaps with Europe – which opposes unilateral Israeli action – not least because of the need for a united front on the Iranian issue.

During the joint press conference, Bush reiterated his rejection of any contacts with Hamas unless it changes its stance. He also described convergence as a "daring ... constructive ... positive" idea which "can constitute an important step towards peace ... and can lead to a two-state solution ... if it proves impossible to advance on the basis of the roadmap." However, most of his remarks related to his vision, the roadmap, the need to negotiate with Abu Mazen, and the problem of Hamas. The President also noted that permanent borders can only be set in negotiations and that the parties should refrain from acts that prejudice the outcome of negotiations. He was therefore

unwilling to go beyond the formula in his April 2004 letter to Ariel Sharon concerning settlement blocs ("major Israeli population centers").

Olmert lined up with the American position. Until his visit, he had shown no sense of urgency in meeting with a "weak" Abu Mazen and even reprimanded his Defense Minister for suggesting otherwise, but at the press conference he promised to meet "in the near future" and to exhaust all possibilities for negotiations. Olmert had originally wanted through convergence to set Israel's "permanent borders," but at the President's side he repeated the formula elaborated during the advance work -- "secure borders" -- and he noted that the settlement blocs would be incorporated into Israel only "in the framework of a permanent status agreement." And while the Prime Minister had previously planned to implement convergence within two years – and was roundly condemned for his slow pace – in the US he spoke of "three to four years." Finally, the term "convergence" itself was replaced by a word connoting much less finality: "realignment."

All in all, the US expressed tentative support for Olmert's idea of disengagement. In return, Olmert shifted the near-term focus from programmatic planning to diplomatic engagement with Abu Mazen, he obfuscated/conceded the element of "finality," and he extended the timetable. According to press reports, State Department representatives will travel to Israel in June to begin translating the idea of "realignment" into a real plan, but the work will proceed slowly. For the US, the first priority is to soften up Hamas and strengthen Abu Mazen in order to maximize the chances for bilateral progress. Only when the Americans are convinced that the potential for negotiations has been exhausted will they release the brakes on realignment. The Prime Minister of Israel will adjust to their pace.

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