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## Winograd Part II: Implications for U.S.-Israeli Relations

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On January 30, retired Israeli judge Eliyahu Winograd released his much-anticipated second report on government decisionmaking during the summer 2006 Lebanon war. It did not issue a deathblow to Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert, but instead described the breakdown in U.S.-Israeli strategic coordination as the principal rationale for Olmert's decision to invade Lebanon just hours before a UN ceasefire was to be implemented. This analysis has considerable ramifications for the future conduct of U.S.-Israeli relations.

### Basics of the Winograd Report

The report is a comprehensive review of Israeli decisionmaking during the inconclusive thirty-four-day Lebanon war. Available only in Hebrew, the unclassified version of the report is 629 pages long, including transcripts of cabinet sessions, meetings of Israel Defense Forces (IDF) leaders, excerpts of telephone conversations between top officials, and testimonies from all major Israeli figures involved at the time.

The second installment of the report leveled many sharp critiques but was not as scathing as the first part, issued last spring. At a January 30 press conference, Winograd -- who heads the five-member investigative panel -- did not let the Olmert government or the IDF off the hook, declaring that the war was "a mixture of flawed conduct [by] the political and military leadership," "flawed performance by the military, especially the ground forces," and "deficient Israeli preparedness." He added, "We found serious failings and flaws in the lack of strategic thinking and planning." According to Winograd, the committee decided not to assign personal blame for the war's shortcomings, preferring to discuss ways to prevent similar mistakes in the future.

On one key question that has attracted much public attention in Israel, the report vindicated Olmert's decision to order the military offensive that claimed thirty-three Israeli lives just before a ceasefire was announced. Winograd described the UN-brokered ceasefire as an "achievement for Israel" and asserted that Olmert, in ordering the last-minute ground offensive, acted "out of a strong and sincere perception" of what was in "Israel's interest."

In light of the report's tone, the Olmert government is likely to remain in power to pursue the post-Annapolis peace process with the Palestinians. Furthermore, the findings diminish the possibility that Defense Minister Ehud Barak will pull his nineteen-member Labor Party faction out of the government and deprive Olmert's coalition of its ruling majority.

### U.S.-Israeli Coordination and the Final Military Offensive

Unlike the first report, the second focused considerably on U.S.-Israeli relations. A close look at the text shows that changing signals from Washington regarding the terms of the ceasefire agreement -- as set forth in UN Security Council Resolution 1701 -- were at the center of Israel's controversial decision to launch a ground assault.

Whether to conduct that assault toward the Litani River, located twelve miles north of the Israeli-Lebanese

border, became an issue of internal dispute in the early stages of the conflict. Indeed, the report repeatedly blames the Israeli government for getting stuck in a strategic "muddle." By failing to decide for almost a month whether to launch a quick offensive or a major ground operation, the government and IDF did not effectively integrate Israel's military and political objectives.

Specifically, on August 5, 2006, the cabinet ordered the IDF to come up with a plan for a ground assault amid growing frustration over Hizballah's month-long rocket fire. Although Olmert believed it was possible to reach a ceasefire that would obviate the need for a ground assault, the ceasefire resolution was still being negotiated when a key cabinet meeting was held on August 9. Defense Minister Amir Peretz and IDF chief of staff Dan Halutz pushed for an assault that they claimed would last about a month, while others favored a more limited operation, as proposed by former IDF chief of staff and transportation minister Shaul Mofaz. More cabinet ministers believed his plan was practical in light of the possible ceasefire; it called for the IDF to encircle the Litani in a manner that would avert heavy casualties.

According to the report, Olmert thought that the assault could be averted if a ceasefire were achieved. Therefore, despite his belief that he must back the current IDF leadership as a matter of principle, the prime minister was initially unyielding in his resistance to Peretz's relentless appeals, repeatedly asking the military if a ground presence would be successful in halting the rocket fire. The report suggests that Olmert, like many of his cabinet ministers, was wary of getting stuck in Lebanon, as happened in the aftermath of the 1982 war. Olmert insisted, however, that the cabinet back the IDF plan but withhold implementation pending ceasefire developments.

In addition to these internal divisions, the report highlights the degree to which the prime minister's office was subsequently blindsided by the draft ceasefire resolution negotiated by the United States and France. The released text provides detailed accounts of shocked Israeli government officials charging that they had no idea the United States would allow carefully negotiated terms to be suddenly reversed. According to the report, this reversal occurred between a draft that Assistant Secretary of State David Welch shared with Israelis on August 10 and a fax of the new draft from Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns late that same night. The Burns draft reportedly included no enforcement for a weapons embargo on Hizballah and no mention that embargo violations would be sanctioned by chapter seven of the UN Charter (which authorizes the use of force).

The report concludes that when the altered ceasefire terms proved highly disappointing to Israel, Olmert yielded. In his own testimony before the Winograd Committee, he decided to go to war because he believed there would be a vacuum between the ceasefire declaration and the actual bolstering of UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) peacekeepers, and therefore that Israeli positions would be taken by Hizballah militia members. As such, Olmert believed he had no other choice but to approve the ground assault, partly in order to improve the ceasefire terms. Indeed, in the final ceasefire draft, the vacuum issue was resolved.

### **Lessons for U.S.-Israeli Relations?**

The Winograd Report -- at least the unclassified version -- is careful not to blame the Bush administration, admitting that it did not interview U.S. officials who may have their own view of the events. The one person who does blame the United States outright is John Bolton, who served as U.S. ambassador to the UN at the time. In his memoirs, he wrote that Washington prioritized its relationship with Europe and the fragility of the Lebanese government over Israeli concerns about the exact terms of Resolution 1701.

In essence, then, the report demonstrates that when coordination between the United States and Israel weakens, there can be tragic military consequences. If Israel was in fact blindsided by the new ceasefire terms, as the report suggests, then that can help explain why Olmert ordered a ground assault in which he did not fully believe. According to this view, a breakdown in communication occurred that left Israel assuming one set of resolution terms when a somewhat different set was being negotiated with other parties. In light of these findings, the United States and Israel should examine why their close coordination during the Lebanon war

apparently failed at a crucial moment.

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