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## **Analysis: Minding the store with the big decisions on hold**

By [Aluf Benn](#)

Ehud Olmert's short term as acting prime minister that began on January 4 consisted, primarily, of reacting to events and trying to convey a message of governmental stability. His government refrained from making major decisions that would bind the new one to be elected on Tuesday.

"Olmert's government was a transitional government twice over," explained a senior government official. "First because he served during a campaign season, and also because of Olmert's status as temporary acting prime minister for [Ariel] Sharon. Such circumstances are not conducive to reforms and changes."

Olmert's major decisions were forced on him by events Hamas' victory in the Palestinian elections, the High Court of Justice's ruling that the government must demolish houses in the settlement outpost of Amona, Qassam rocket launches from Gaza, the departure of British and U.S. jailers from the Jericho prison, and the bird flu outbreak. But he aspired to project an image of discretion, responsibility and level-headedness.

During his first month in office, he behaved like Sharon's substitute, keeping a low public profile and consulting frequently with Sharon's advisers. His first major decision was to allow the Palestinian elections to take place in East Jerusalem, and he justified this by citing a secret agreement that Sharon had made with the United States before his stroke.

Hamas' victory surprised Olmert, and since then, he has tried primarily to buy time, to keep the issue out of the campaign, and to achieve maximum coordination with the United States and Europe. He set three conditions for talks with Hamas that it recognize Israel, abandon terror and honor previous Israeli-Palestinian agreements and won international backing for them. With Egyptian help, he reached a quiet understanding whereby the Hamas government would take office only after the Israeli elections. And, aside from freezing transfers of tax revenues to the Palestinian Authority, he largely refrained from punishing the Palestinians for electing Hamas.

On the security front, Olmert faced a double challenge imposing his will on the defense establishment, despite lacking Sharon's stellar military record, and deciding whether to use force in the territories. He repeatedly stressed that he would not hesitate to use force against either Palestinians or settlers. Thus, he ordered the forcible evacuation of Amona that spun out of control and resulted in many casualties; and he also resumed assassinations of Islamic Jihad operatives in response to the daily Qassam launches, correctly predicting that Hamas would not respond to pinpoint Israeli operations in the territories. And when the British and U.S. officials evacuated the Jericho jail, he authorized the army to raid the prison and arrest six senior Palestinian wanted men.

As time passed, and the public internalized the severity of Sharon's situation and the fact that he would not be returning to the Prime Minister's Office, Olmert began displaying more independence. He reverted to his own managerial and media styles, which differed from those of Sharon, and in early March, he presented his diplomatic program for setting Israel's borders and withdrawing from most of the West Bank.

Domestically, Olmert relied on several senior officials Cabinet Secretary Yisrael Maimon, Attorney General Menachem Mazuz, Finance Ministry director general Yossi Bachar and the treasury's budget director, Koby Haber. Mazuz forbade Olmert's transition government to make major decisions, and the two treasury officials controlled the purse strings, even though Olmert was officially the finance minister. The result, treasury officials said, is that this was the cheapest campaign on record from the perspective of the national budget: The only major budgetary outlay approved during this period was Education Minister Meir Sheerit's addition of NIS 130 million to the culture budget.

To demonstrate that there was no power vacuum, Olmert insisted on holding cabinet meetings every week, even when there was no real business to discuss. His government, consisting solely of Kadima ministers, displayed unusual harmony; there were no political disputes, and all cabinet decisions passed unanimously. But other than those relating to Hamas' victory and the bird flu outbreak, most of these decisions dealt with minor matters.

Olmert succeeded in demonstrating that there was someone minding the store, and he reacted in a timely fashion to external events. But the truly weighty decisions were postponed until after the elections.

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