

Olmert's specifics

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As the election campaign goes into higher gear, Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is belatedly giving the voters a better idea of what he would do as prime minister. Better late than never.

When he was last elected in 2003, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon gave us no idea that he would implement a unilateral withdrawal from Gaza. On the contrary, he ran against Labor's Amram Mitzna, who *did* favor unilateral withdrawals. It is possible to distinguish between what Sharon did and what Mitzna promised, but it takes a considerable contortion to argue, as some have, that Sharon's talk of "painful concessions" was ample forewarning of disengagement.

Moreover, when Sharon founded Kadima in November, he made clear that he had "no plans" for further withdrawals, and that his only plan was the road map. Almost no one, it seems, took Sharon's quasi-commitment at face value.

Relative to Sharon's 2003 campaign, and even to Sharon's stance in November, Olmert is a model of candor. In his interview in today's *Jerusalem Post*, Olmert pledges to "get to Israel's permanent borders, whereby we will completely separate from the majority of the Palestinian population and preserve a large and stable Jewish majority in Israel."

Olmert also claims that he will build Jewish neighborhoods in the area called E1, connecting Jerusalem with its suburb to the east, Ma'aleh Adumim. This construction plan, though long ago approved by the various planning committees, was frozen following American objections, as Olmert himself acknowledged about six months ago.

In his interview with the *Post*, Olmert states that his guidelines include the "Jerusalem envelope," Ma'aleh Adumim, the "Ariel region," and Gush Etzion. But he also takes the trouble to distance himself from similar remarks by his Kadima colleague, Avi Dichter, who in addition envisions Israel holding on to the Jordan Valley and additional groups of settlements. By contrast, Olmert only commits to "the Jordan *River* as a security border."

Olmert also distinguishes between the current route of the security fence, which he says is defined only by security concerns, and where the "permanent" border will run. He claims that the fence will "in certain places move east, and in other places west."

While holding open the possibility that Hamas will bow to the conditions set by Israel and the international community regarding combating terrorism and accepting Israel, the thrust of his plan assumes the opposite: that the road map will be a dead letter, that Israel has been freed from its constraints - including those inherited from Oslo - and that the US can be persuaded to support Israel acting unilaterally on "final-status" issues.

Whether this logic makes sense is precisely what the voters will be deciding in this election. It would be good, however, to know if he really thinks that Israel can establish a *permanent* border unilaterally.

It is perhaps wise to act as if this were the case for the purpose of establishing the strongest possible negotiating position. But we should not confuse ourselves. Any border determined unilaterally must leave room to negotiate, unless Israel plans to live indefinitely without a full and formal peace agreement with its neighbors.

In this context, Olmert's implication that he tends toward a more minimalist map - one that does not include the Jordan Valley,

its western slopes, and other groups of settlements - is disturbing.

Israel should be insisting that the Palestinian choice to continue its war with Israel will have territorial consequences. Why should largely empty areas, like the Jordan Valley and the Judean desert, be divided in the Palestinians' favor if we continue to be under attack? What incentive do the Palestinians have to end their war with us if they receive the same territories in any case?

At this point, Olmert has arguably laid out his diplomatic blueprint with more specificity than have his rivals in Labor and the Likud (Uzi Dayan's Tafnit has been most specific, having published a precise map for its proposed unilateral withdrawal). We hope that Olmert will flesh out Kadima's positions on economic and social issues that will be no less important to the electorate in the years ahead.

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